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AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

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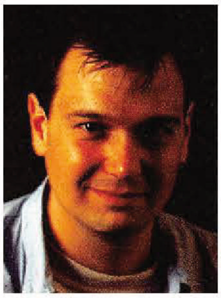
PCPP 300: HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO US (AND YOU!)



Commanded the Glorious PC Gaming Master Race army to crush heretical console gamer hordes.

BEN MANSILL
EDITOR
ben.mansill@futurenet.com

It is often said that one is not truly a PC gamer unless you read and love PC PowerPlay. Well, maybe someone once said that a decade or two ago. But look! Here we are, 27 years in print, having fended off the internet and we're still playing hard.

We're celebrating 300 issues this month. That's a pretty big deal and we hope it makes you as happy as it does us. When we started PCPP in 1996 we could barely look beyond the month ahead. Now in 2023 we're still playing with power. Join us as we celebtrate 27 years of PC gaming, PCPP itself, and your ride with us over these many fantastic years of gaming goodness.

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The PC PowerPlay team

WES FENLON

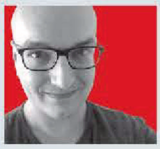
This month
Broke sci-fi roguelike deckbuilder *Earthless* on preview with an elite card combo. Made its devs cry.

ROBIN VALENTINE

This month
Played tic-tac-toe with Gordrakk and won. Then spent weeks extracting himself from Maw-Krusha.

TED LITCHFIELD

This month
Got promoted to BattleMech pilot. Stomped to Paddington for a latte.



HARVEY RANDALL

This month
Was disappointed to learn that Umbral, the land of the dead, has no Maccy D's franchise.

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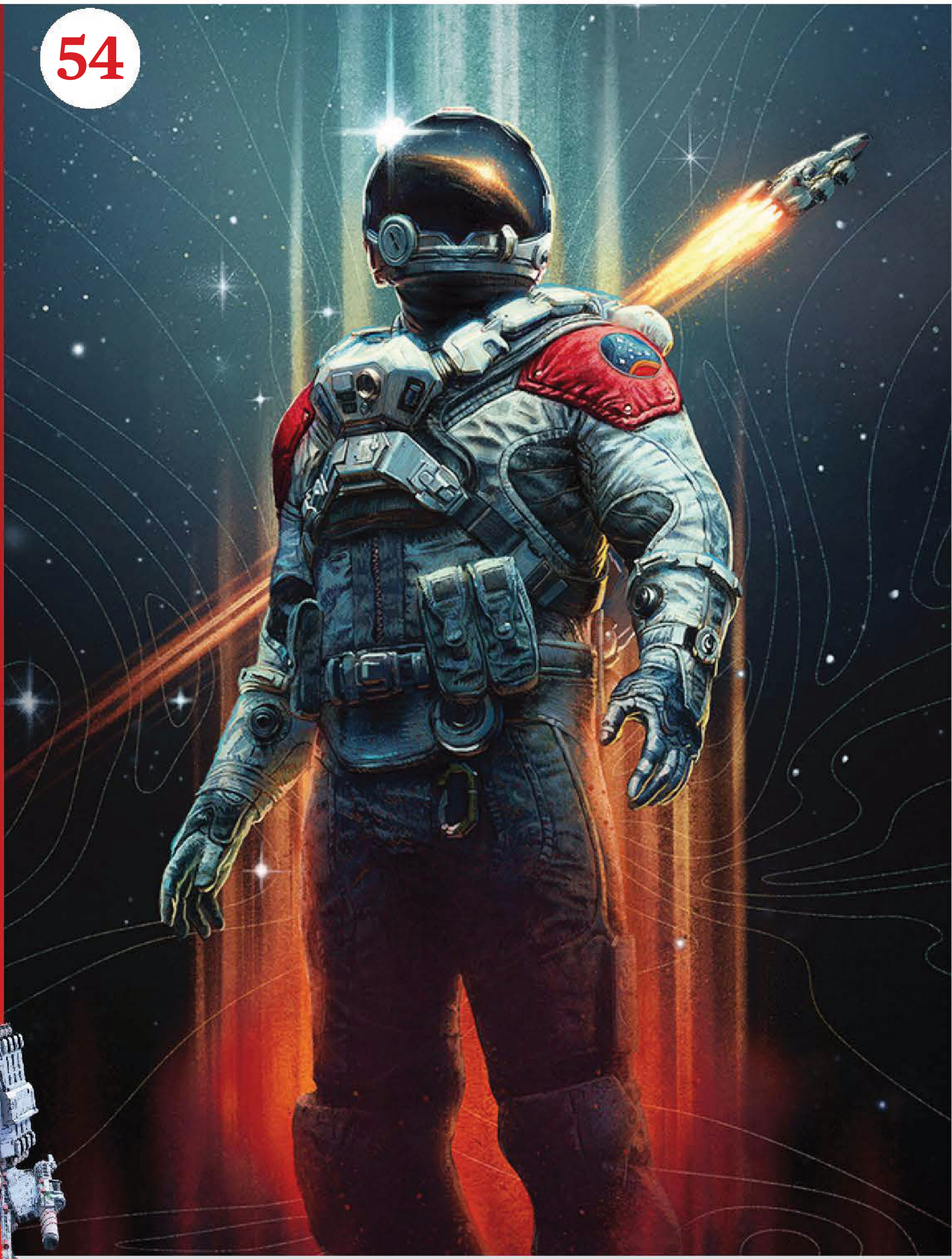

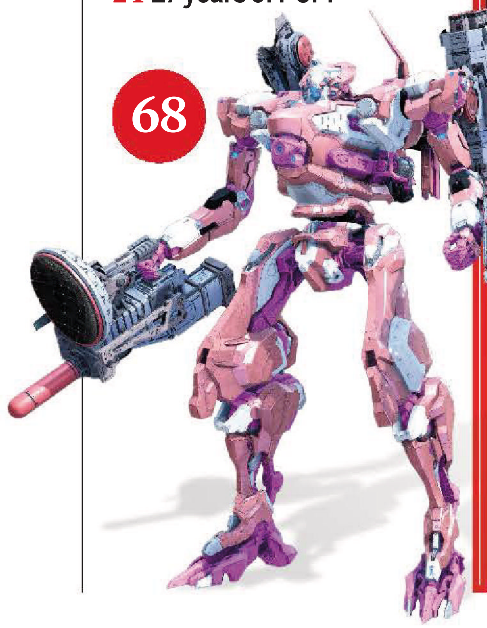

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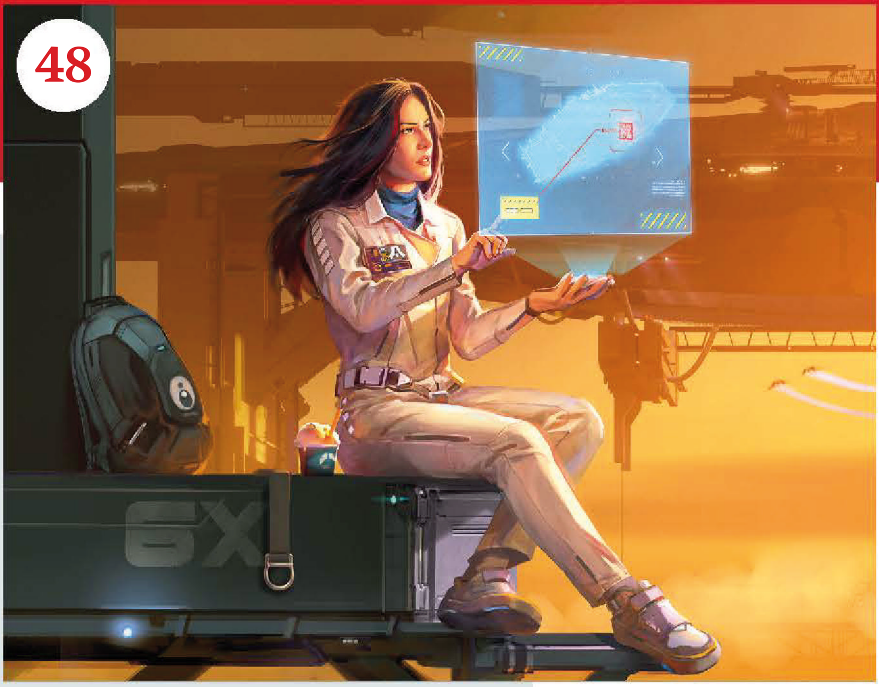

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THE WITCHER
ONLY ON NETFLIX

The producer's comments elicited a predictable response.

WHICH WITCHER?

NETFLIX GUY blames "Americans and young people" for dumbing down

Former Gerlat Henry Cavill has made a point of saying he "pushed really, really hard" to stay true to the Witcher books, while also claiming that some of the writers on the show "actively disliked" them.

Some aspects of Andrzej Sapkowski's novels have been simplified for the TV show, and in an interview with Polish site Wyborcza, executive producer Tomek Baginski said: "[A] higher level of nuance and complexity will have a smaller range."

Baginski said he encountered a "perceptual block" with American audiences some years ago, when he was promoting an unfinished film project called Hardkor 44, a sci-fi retelling of the Warsaw Uprising.

"For Americans, it was completely incomprehensible, too complicated, because they grew up in a different historical context, where everything was arranged: America is always good, the rest are the bad guys. And there are no complications."

> "FOR AMERICANS, IT WAS COMPLETELY INCOMPREHENSIBLE, TOO COMPLICATED"

That lesson, whether you agree with it or not, apparently stuck. "When a series is made for a huge mass of viewers [and] a large part of them are Americans, these simplifications not only make sense, they are necessary," Baginski said. "It's painful for us, and for me too, but the higher level of nuance and complexity will have a smaller range."

Zinging the US has been a pan-European pastime of highfalutin creatives for decades, sure, but even so the specificity of Baginski's criticism comes off as kind of weird and unnecessarily insulting.

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ORBITAL OWLBEAR

BEAR DOES DAMAGE

Min-maxers are terrifying. You think you know everything there is to know about a game, and then someone cooks up a build that launches a 5,000kg owlbear from 100ft on some poor sod, dealing enough damage to one-shot an adult dragon with no saving throw. The Sword Coast trembles. ■ ***HR***

PUCKER UPWARDS

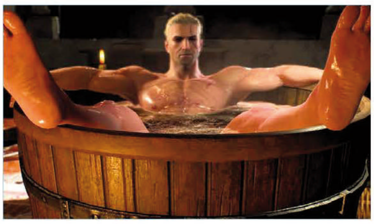
NO KISSING FOR GNOMES

Playing a gnome or halfling in *Baldur's Gate III*? Better buy a stepladder. Players of the pint-sized races have been having a little trouble on the romance front recently, finding themselves unable to lock lips with NPCs like Karlach and kissing air instead. Don't worry, Larian's looking into it. ■ ***JW***

BIRTHDAYS!

WARGAMING TURNS 25

Just as we started work on this historic birthday issue of PCPP, word came that our friends at Wargaming were also celebrating their 25th anniversary. We have too many hours accumulated in *World of Tanks* to not take note of this, and we congratulate Wargaming for making great games for so long! ■ ***RS***



TOP: The Witcher books are complicated as hell, maybe you can't just dump that on people.

ABOVE RIGHT: Geralt is always in that bath.

He's not done, either. In addition to laying the blame at the door of all Americans, Baginski had more shots to fire: in an interview with YouTube channel Imponderabilia, he pointed the finger at the kids, saying that growing up with YouTube and TikTok has left them without the patience for "longer content [and] long and complicated chains of cause and effect". The interviewer in this case said, "What you mean is that you don't know how to make a show that kids would like to watch." Ouch.

Baginski's comments have attracted scorn, coming as they do amidst a lukewarm reception to The Witcher's last season with Cavill. The show has changed many of the books' major plot points, but at a time when media is either an immediate hit or a complete failure, that's a problem. A YouTube adaptation, Alzur's Legacy, doesn't follow the exploits of Geralt but captures the flavour perfectly – and maybe simplifying the source material is what Netflix is really running up against.

The third season of The Witcher is now out in full on Netflix. We enjoyed the first half of the season quite a bit, but it's faring somewhat unevenly on review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes: It holds a 77% rating with critics, but just 22% with audiences. Season 4, like *The Witcher 4*, is going to be make-or-break. ■

Andy Chalk

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

Most impressive
Nightdive is remaking 1995's *Star Wars: Dark Forces.*

Re-Deck
Valve has once again done a Valve, and you can buy a refurbished Steam Deck.

Black Isle's 25th
Obsidian has been celebrating 25 years of its predecessor Black Isle, one of the greatest RPG studios. Salut, you beautiful bastards.

R2 Much
A streamer spent so many hours grinding for every skill point in *Jedi Survivor*'s opening level that they just gave up.

Red Dead
Take-Two has re-released *RDR1* on consoles without any enhancements, but no PC release.

Don't tempt me reader
Post Malone bought the Ring of Sauron Magic: The Gathering card valued at $2million.

LOWS

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The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy is at home in the world of darkness. After all, covert operations work best under the cover of night. One consequence of these nocturnal wanderings, though, is that The Spy has become rather familiar with rubbing shoulders with the undead, and specifically vampires.

Indeed, it was only after Lestat de Lioncourt was particularly taken with The Spy that The Spy could then pass freely among the children of the damned unmolested. It just goes to show what a night of reading PC PowerPlay can do, even when those being read to were born in 1760.

One thing The Spy has learned from two-stepping with blood-sucking brethren is that you need to be prepared for long periods of silence in between the impromptu late-night visits and lengthy philosophical discussions on the meaning of existence. Many lesser spies with delicate egos will likely take these absences as a shot at their character, but The Spy knows better. Vampires, let The Spy tell you, love a good period of ghosting others, mainly because they themselves aren’t half partial to a long sleep.

Eventually vampires will resurface, just like The Spy was cunningly waiting for *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2* to do in Seattle a few weeks back. This is the game that had its original developer, Hardsuit Labs, removed from its production back in 2020 following a delay in the game’s release date and, allegedly, a troubled development.

Originally that delayed release date was supposed to be 2021, but The Spy soon discovered that, in fact, the game was being delayed indefinitely, with no word on who was taking up its development reins or when it would indeed see the light of day.

THE SPY
The Spy summers with Lestat de Lioncourt on Lake Como.

SERIES OF THE DAMNED

The re-emergence has come in the form of *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2*’s publisher, Paradox Interactive, being overheard by The Spy confirming that it is “looking forward to showing more in September this year”, along with The Spy going eyes-on with five new screens of the game showing some of its environments.

The Spy also overheard that Paradox has had its “heads down working on the game” and that it “remains just as dedicated to delivering a great game”. Interestingly, though, The Spy has also discovered that while Paradox is still guaranteeing all preorders for digital editions of the game, its physical edition preorders, including the game’s special collector’s edition, are all being refunded, as they are “no longer representative of the game”.

> **PARADOX HAS HAD ITS “HEADS DOWN WORKING ON THE GAME”**

What’s intriguing here to The Spy is that, in many respects, history is repeating itself with *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2*, as those PC gamers old enough to remember will recall that the original *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* also famously had a troubled development and was released in one of the most buggy states of any game ever made.

How Paradox has been controlling the development of *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2*’s during the past few years remains a mystery, but The Spy knows that PC gamers the world over will be praying that the time has been used wisely, for there are many gaming brethren desperate to jump back into its dark world. Spy out. ■

The Spy

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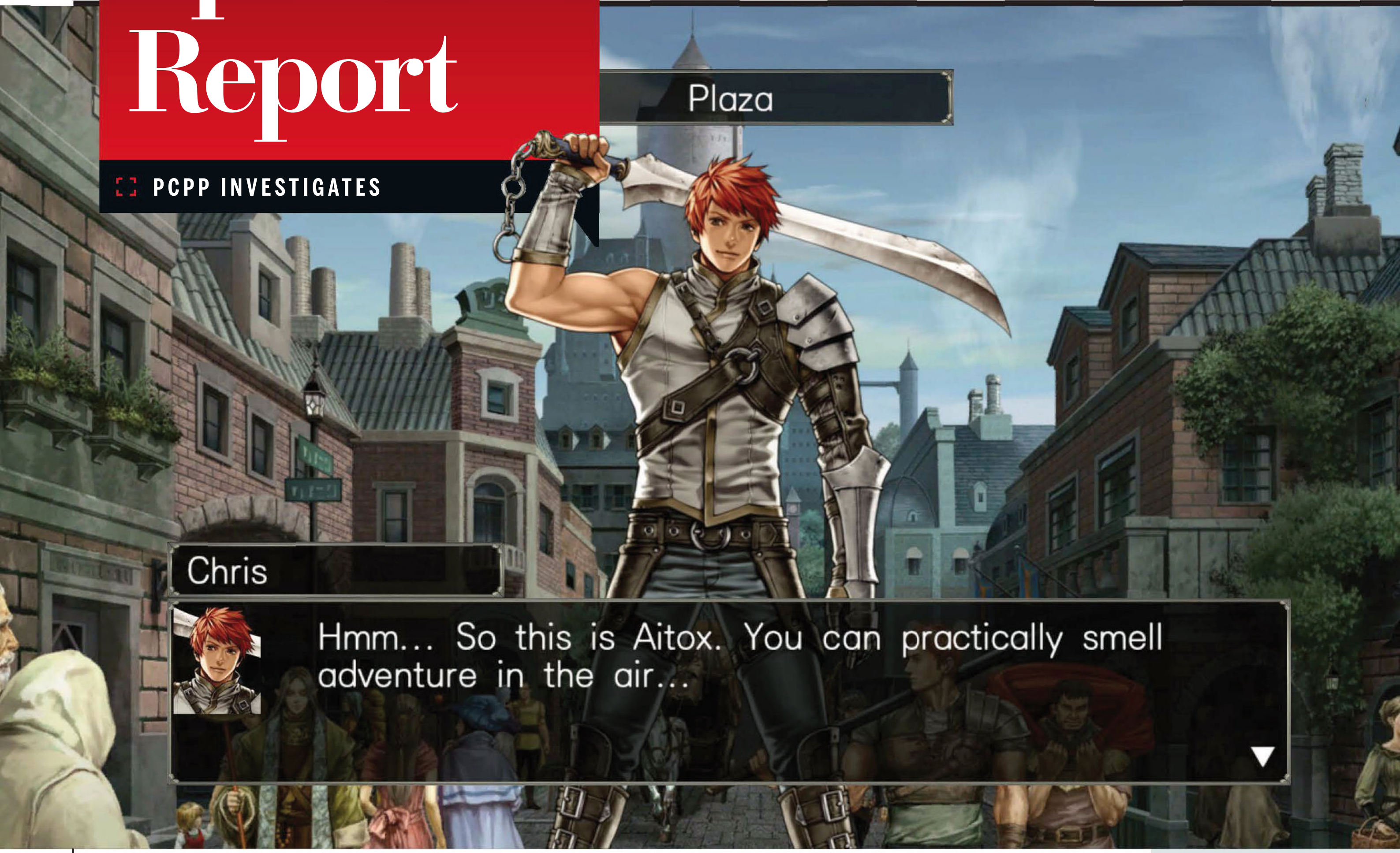

Hmm... So this is Aitox. You can practically smell adventure in the air...

WIZARDRY'S LEGACY

Over 40 years old, the WIZARDRY series is still kicking

The name *Wizardry* still carries weight, which is probably why the recent announcement of *Eternal Crypt: Wizardry BC* – a blockchain-based clicker game and NFT platform – went down like a lead balloon. A sad sign of the times, perhaps, but a good excuse to talk with Robert and Norman Sirotek, the brothers behind Sir-Tech, publisher of the most influential RPGs of the 1980s.

It's hard to imagine a world without *Wizardry*. The first game, *Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord*, released in 1981 for the Apple II before being ported to almost every platform of its era, is one of the key foundational works of the medium. Even in its original form it's intuitive, accessible and (to anyone who's played a dungeon crawler) immediately familiar.

Wizardry had players roll a party of six adventurers and send them into a deadly grid-map labyrinth full of monsters, traps and the occasional puzzle. While there was an evil wizard lurking at the bottom to defeat, that RPG grind for XP, gold and gear was the core appeal. *Wizardry* pioneered a lot of what's now standard in both western and Japanese RPGs: parties, distinct battle screens, characters able to change class as they levelled up, spells following a simple naming structure.

I asked the Siroteks what defined *Wizardry* for them and what sets it aside from its peers of the time. They, in turn, quoted 'digital antiquarian' Jimmy Maher on the series, "For all its legendary difficulty, *Wizardry* requires no deductive or inductive brilliance or leaps of logical (or illogical) reasoning. It rewards patience, a willingness to experiment and learn from mistakes, attention to detail, and a dedication to doing things the right way." That intuitive appeal led to *Wizardry* catching the eye of some of Japan's earliest games distributors, but Sir-Tech was adamant that it wanted to retain creative control.

"We've got to give ASCII a lot of credit, but part of the reason why we did so well in Japan is when they came to us, they said, 'We want to market it and we want to license it,' and we said, 'No, we want to control it. We want to be in control of our own destiny, so why don't we do a distribution deal?'" says Norman Sirotek. "They agreed, and we had to deliver them the finished product in a box, shrink-wrapped and ready to go. We flew our developers out to Japan and they spent six or seven months there, converting it to about seven different computers."

Sticking to its guns is likely what gave earlier *Wizardry* games such a strong identity worldwide. Sir-Tech's core *Wizardry* games are split up into two distinct series: the original five are pure dungeon crawls where characters are expendable but free to be ported between games.

The anime

One of the more interesting projects to spring from *Wizardry*'s international licensing was a one-shot anime adaptation produced by Shochiku Fuji and released in 1991. It's passably animated, but pleasantly authentic to the first game, following a vaguely amoral, treasure-hungry adventuring party through the ninth and tenth levels of the original dungeon, culminating in a showdown with the wizard Werdna.

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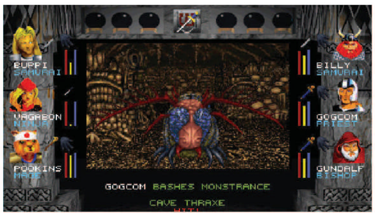
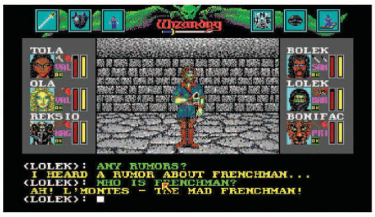
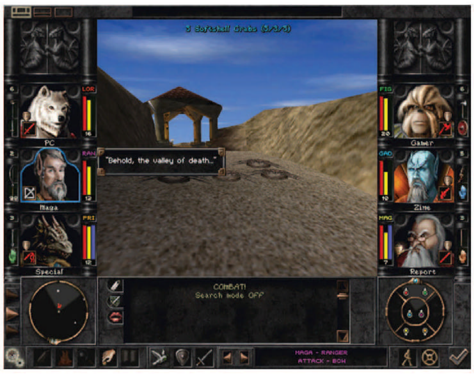


GOGCOM BASHES MONSTRANCE
CAVE THRAXE



<LOLEK>: ANY RUMORS?
I HEARD A RUMOR ABOUT FRENCHMAN...
<LOLEK>: WHO IS FRENCHMAN?
AH! L'MONTES - THE MAD FRENCHMAN!
<LOLEK>:



"Behold, the valley of death..."

COMBAT!
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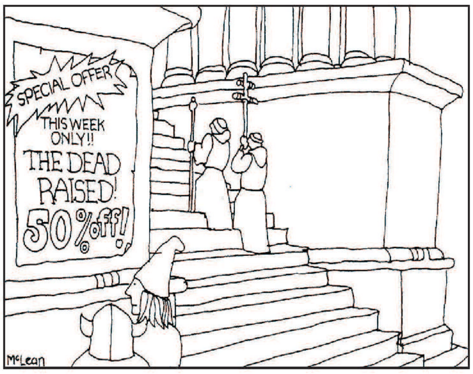
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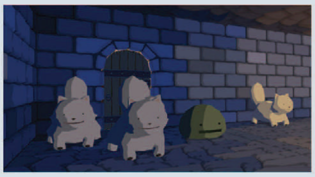
McLean

TOP MIDDLE: *Wizardry 8* was vastly more mechanically complex than its predecessors, but still feels like part of the series.

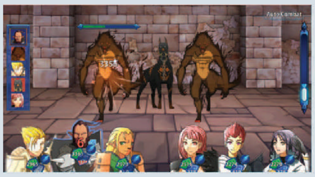
TOP RIGHT: The *Wizardry* manual's art set the tone: adventuring is a cartoonish profession where death is an inconvenience.

SIDE DUNGEONS *Four games that stay true to the* Wizardry *formula*



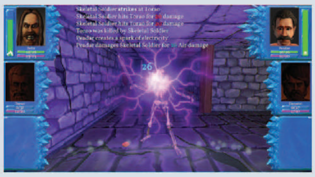
POTATO FLOWERS IN FULL BLOOM

Three-character parties, complex multi-elevation dungeons and surprisingly tactical combat.



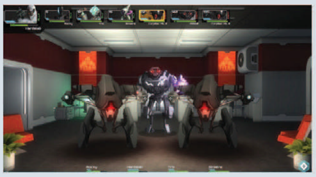
INFINITE ADVENTURES

This one's beefy: six-character parties, randomly generated maps and complex character progression.



HEROES OF A BROKEN LAND 2

Still in Early Access. As well as *Wiz*-esque dungeoneering, there's a strategic town-building world map layer to master.



STARCRAWLERS

Wizardry! In! Space! Four-character parties with much more intricate missions and combat.

Wizardry 4: The Return of Werdna is the awkward middle child. Brutally hard, but interesting because it cast players as the original's evil wizard antagonist. Players assembled teams of monsters to fight against NPC heroes reportedly based on player data recovered from discs sent into Sir-Tech. It was also the first in the series (and one of the first games ever) with multiple endings, including good and evil routes, plus a well hidden secret ending that demanded deep knowledge of kabbalistic lore to uncover.

ASCII NICELY

Japanese publisher ASCII would go on to make new games under the *Wizardry* brand through the PlayStation 2 era before selling on the license. Back in the west, *Wizardry 6* through *8* became more complex and story-driven. With a science-fantasy setting created by new director/designer David W Bradley, space travel, furries and cosmic gods defined the tone, far from *Wizardry*'s D&D-lite roots. While Bradley was the key figure credited for the first two (released in 1990 and 1992 respectively), the ambitious finale wouldn't surface until 2001, helmed by Linda Currie and Brenda Romero (Braithewaite, at the time), two now-highly influential women in the industry who started out running the *Wizardry* phone hint-line in the early '80s.

SPACE TRAVEL, FURRIES AND COSMIC GODS DEFINED THE TONE

With *Wizardry 8* intended to be the final game in the series, Sir-Tech once more turned to Japan to keep the brand alive, selling the trademark and the rights to the later games. The buyer was a major player in Japanese online gaming, but the *Wizardry* brand wasn't turning as many heads as it hoped. The rights were sold again, and licensed out to various parties over the years. A Japanese company called Drecom bought the IP in 2020, bringing us to the blockchain proposition that went over about as well as a curdled milk chugging contest. But there is some hope for *Wizardry*'s future – or maybe more accurately, its past. The Siroteks still have the license for the first five games, and there are plans in motion to use it. At the very least, it sounds like they'll be going in a different direction than Drecom.

"It's really their choice, and not a matter for me to cast judgment on," Robert Sirotek says diplomatically. "But we have our own designs and directions for *Wizardry*. Specifically *Wizardry 1-5*, and we plan to stay true to our roots and keep it authentic. If Drecom wants to go down that road, more power to them, but it's not where we want to go with it."

Despite *Wizardry*'s stagnation, fans of the genre it defined are eating good. The PC has been blessed by the remastered *Etrian Odyssey* series, the excellent *Undernauts: Labyrinth of Yomi* and the overwhelmingly systems-driven *Labyrinth of Galleria: The Moon Society* in just the last two years. If building a party of expendable fools to die in dungeons is your thing, you're spoilt for choice. Whether or not the *Wizardry* brand is revived (or someone drags it to the temple for a cheap resurrection) almost feels beside the point. But it sounds like *Wizardry*'s original masters are gearing up to venture into the dungeon once again. ■

Dominic Tarason

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TRAILER SWIFT

Freelance video editor **JAMES MCGREGOR** on making a good videogame trailer

James McGregor got his start in video editing when, as a member of Rooster Teeth's Achievement Hunter community, he became a part-time contractor managing and moderating their community video submissions. This helped him develop his editing style which, in turn, led to a professional job within the game industry itself.

Eventually, a job opening for junior video editor at Team 17 caught his eye. "I was looking for something more permanent rather than pipeline contract work." he explains, "so I thought, I don't have any *real* past experience, but I'll apply." One fake trailer for a nonexistent *Overcooked* DLC and two interviews later, McGregor had landed the job. This involved tasks such as B-roll generation, screenshot capture... and trailer creation and editing. Today he's freelance, helping a variety of developers and publishers produce trailers for their games. But how does that work come his way?

"The majority of the work comes through from referrals," he explains. "There are a lot of freelance trailer editors. And if I've got too much on my plate, I'll recommend someone else, and so on." There's also information sharing that saves a lot of work, with heads up given on things like a company logo change which will affect multiple people. It's a competitive community, but a friendly one nonetheless.

Making trailers isn't just about stitching footage together in a pleasing way. For McGregor, at least, it also means capturing that footage yourself. He'll play through a game in its entirety to not only find and capture the best footage, but to get a feel for the game itself, and how best to express its qualities in a trailer. And also play around within the engine to create bespoke footage, blurring the line between developer and video editor.

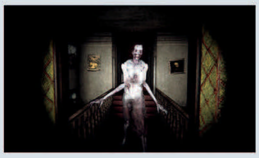
VIDEO STARS

Client briefs can vary as much as the games themselves, from vague and generalised to exacting, lengthy instructions listing in great detail precisely what the developer or publisher wants. "I tend to prefer [something] down the middle; because then it gives me some creative freedom, but also gives me direction on what they want."

PLAY IT FORWARD

Four games James has made trailers for

ROGUE LEGACY 2
A huge fan of the first game, McGregor was thrilled to make almost all of the sequel's trailers.



DEVOUR
His first time making a trailer for a horror game. "This was more of a cinematic approach."

BRAMBLE: THE MOUNTAIN KING
That varied Olle's Story trailer? We have McGregor to thank.

NOBODY SAVES THE WORLD
McGregor worked with Drinkbox to produce the announcement trailer for its adventure game.

As McGregor notes, many people watch trailers with the sound off, but the music is nonetheless a crucial consideration for anybody listening. "I feel like that's the driving flow of the trailer, the consistent thing," he says. "Unless your trailer's a one-shot trailer, the music's going to be the one thing that doesn't change throughout. You're going to be changing, cutting, zooming, panning and so on." The music is an essential mood setter.

"One of my first stages is I will take the music, put it in my timeline, and just put text slates on what I want to show. No footage, no gameplay. And it's kind of blocking out the trailer before there's anything there."

And the ideal trailer length? For McGregor, short is sweet. "I typically say the beauty spot for the length of the trailer is 60 to 90 seconds," he says. "I usually say to a dev or publisher when I'm first starting, 'Give me two weeks.' The first week is mainly learning the game, capturing any problems that we come across with a build, or if something needs to be changed. And then the second week will be the actual editing."

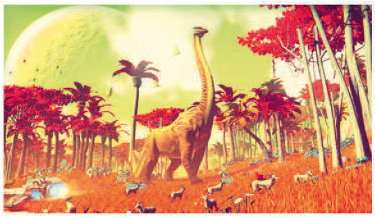
Although McGregor uses development skills to help him create trailers, he's keen to dispel the myth that experience is essential. "I got into it by making YouTube videos in my spare time," he explains. "You don't need to have all this other knowledge for engines and stuff. A lot of the devs – in indie games, anyway – they're friendly, and they want to help. At the end of the day, you're making something for someone, and it's their passion project." ■

Luke Kemp

FEEL THE CHEMISTRY
arasaka
ORBITAL AIR
Bliss

> CLIENT BRIEFS CAN VARY AS MUCH AS THE GAMES THEMSELVES

Well over a decade later, many people still remember *Gears of War*'s Mad World trailer.



ABOVE: *Cyberpunk 2077*'s original trailer back in 2013 didn't quite match what was released...

LEFT: *Dead Island*'s reveal trailer was controversial, but it certainly succeeded in attracting attention.

Incoming

THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

1 month

ASSASSIN'S CREED: MIRAGE

RELEASE October 12, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft Montreal

The series returns to its roots, with a stealth-orientated game taking you back to ninth-century Baghdad. You play as thief-turned-assassin Basim.

ALAN WAKE 2

RELEASE October 17, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Remedy Entertainment

The long-awaited sequel promises more survival and psychological horrors, rejoining the story 13 years after Alan Wake went missing.

CITIES: SKYLINES 2

RELEASE October 24, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Colossal Order Ltd

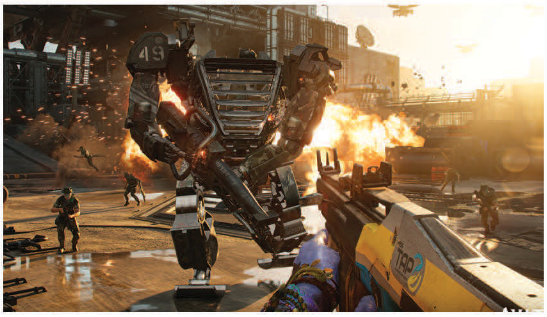
The much-anticipated sequel to arguably the best city building sandbox ever created arrives in late October. Create a thriving metropolis from the ground up.

3 months

LIKE A DRAGON GAIDEN

RELEASE November 8, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

Just when he thought he was out of the Yukaza life, Kazuma Kiryu is dragged back in to conflict by a mysterious figure. Hot new action JRPG incoming.



AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA

RELEASE December 7, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Massive Entertainment

With *Far Cry*-style first-person combat as well as third-person adventuring and beast-riding, this open world action adventure is going big.

WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

RELEASE 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Saber Interactive

It's time to grab your chainsword and thunder hammer, and get rending and crushing orks, tyranids and more. Action-packed sequel incoming winter 2023.

SAPPHIRE

THE HEART – THE BEAT – THE GAME
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AMD RADEON

AMD
RADEON
RX 7900 XT

SAPPHIRE
PULSE

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6 months

PALWORLD

RELEASE January, 2024 | **PUBLISHER** Pocketpair

A multiplayer, open-world survival crafting game in which players befriend and collect mysterious creatures called "Pal". Yes, it's *Pokémon* for PC gamers!

HOMEWORLD 3

RELEASE February, 2024 | **PUBLISHER** Blackbird Interactive

The new game in the classic sci-fi series has slipped out of 2023 into 2024, but still promises to deliver a stunning space-based RTS.

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

RELEASE February 2, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Rocksteady Studios

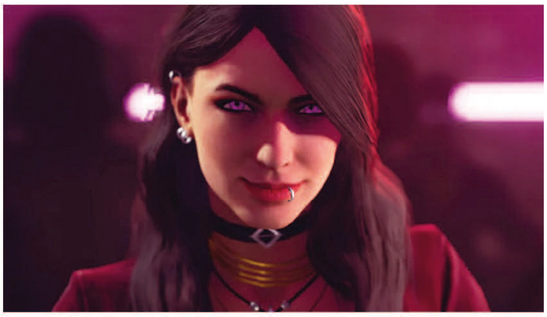
After a one-year release date slip, the action-adventure third-person shooter is set to deliver co-op cape-killing capers. Can the *Batman: Arkham City* studio deliver?

12 months+

ARK 2

RELEASE Unknown | **PUBLISHER** Studio Wildcard

The *Ark* series returns with Vin Diesel-voiced hero Santiago attempting to protect his daughter, Meeka, while surviving in a world dominated by dinosaurs.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE Unkown | **PUBLISHER** Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, the current state of *Bloodlines 2* remains a mystery. Will we see the RPG return from the dead in the next 12 months?

DEATH STRANDING 2

RELEASE Unknown | **PUBLISHER** Kojima Productions

The sequel to Hideo Kojima's critically acclaimed action adventure game/walking simulator *Death Stranding* is incoming, but with no fixed release date so far.

PARTY TIME

MOD MADNESS

Like *Baldur's Gate III* but wish you could have a larger party like in the original two games in the series? Well, thanks to the handy new mod Party Limit Begone, you now can, with up to eight adventures unlocked once installed. You can grab the mod at Nexus Mods right now: shorturl.at/FHMNX

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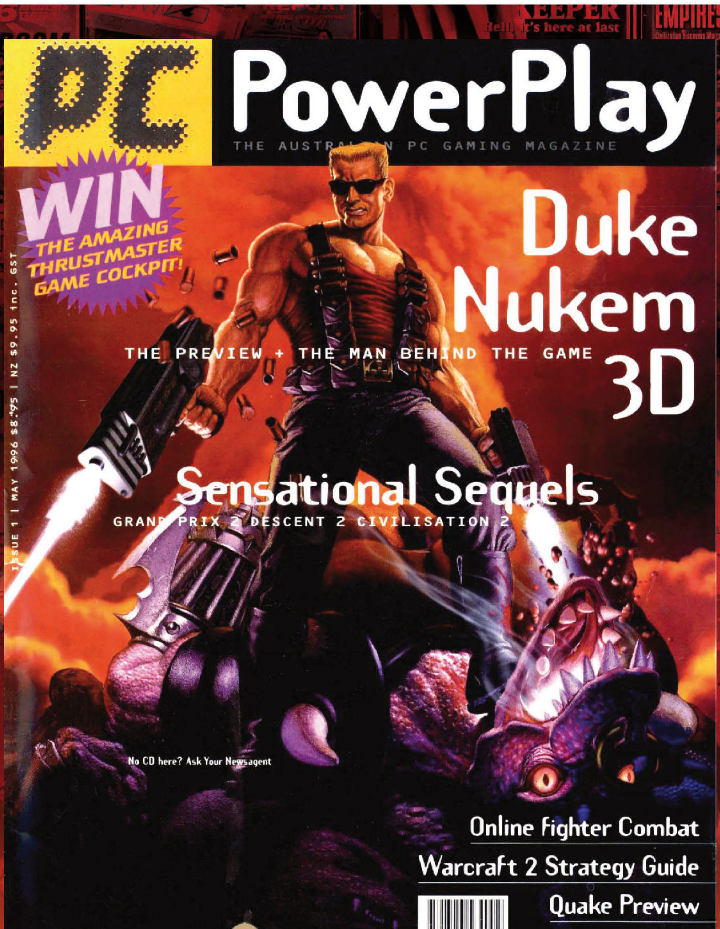
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Quake Preview

Duke Nukem kicked down the door and let the world know that PC PowerPlay had arrived.

IN THE BEGINNING

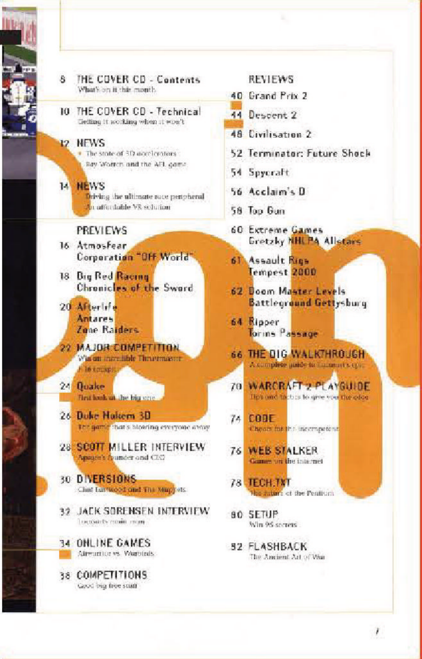
HELLO! MY NAME IS THEO

There was PC gaming. Founding and current editor **BEN MANSILL** welcomes you to the 300th birthday party.

It was 1996 and Australia needed a PC gaming magazine. To say that the PC games scene and its popularity was exploding at that time would be an understatement. Almost all the major developers had Australian-based publishing offices. Australia was – and still is – a disproportionately to its population huge region for PC game sales. And all gamers had to keep up with the scene were the import mags, mostly being the UK's PC Gamer. But they were $20 a copy even back then, and usually at least a couple of months out of date by the time newsagents got them. It was also known that Australian PC gamers craved information. What was new? What was good? What was coming? PC gaming is a life-consuming hobby, and things in the mid-90s were electric. Game and PC tech was evolving at an unbelievable pace. Game design was in its golden era, when very often a new game heralded the beginning of an all-new genre. Every month crazy new shit was happening, and it was all so incredibly compelling.

RETICULATING SPINES

I knew this, as did my colleagues, because at the time I was working at a very small publisher – Next Media – which had just three titles at the time: Rolling Stone, Simply Living, and Hyper. And I was the deputy editor of Hyper, a multi-platform mag that did include PC, but only in rough proportion to the



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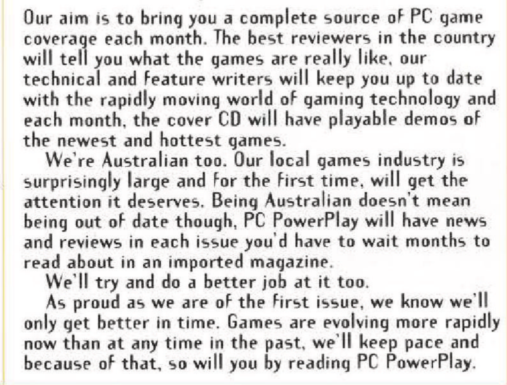

Our aim is to bring you a complete source of PC game coverage each month. The best reviewers in the country will tell you what the games are really like, our technical and feature writers will keep you up to date with the rapidly moving world of gaming technology and each month, the cover CD will have playable demos of the newest and hottest games.

We're Australian too. Our local games industry is surprisingly large and for the first time, will get the attention it deserves. Being Australian doesn't mean being out of date though, PC PowerPlay will have news and reviews in each issue you'd have to wait months to read about in an imported magazine.

We'll try and do a better job at it too.

As proud as we are of the first issue, we know we'll only get better in time. Games are evolving more rapidly now than at any time in the past, we'll keep pace and because of that, so will you by reading PC PowerPlay.

> "IN MAY 1996 ISSUE 1 LAUNCHED. IT WENT OFF SPECTACULARLY AND PCPP WAS BORN."

other console platforms, and there were many. I had zero passion for console gaming, but was tasked daily with writing up that scene, and reviewing stuff like Golden Axe on Mega Drive. Each day I'd read the many wonderful (and usually in beautifully hand-illustrated envelopes) letters from readers wanting to know this that or the other about some PC game. The volume of those was rising steadily month by month. I was the PC guy there, though, so I began a nagging campaign to launch a PC games mag.

The boss wanted a plan, and proof the investment would be a winner. Hyper was absolutely booming, but there was a reluctance high-up to diversify. So we started collecting data on how many newsagents carried PC Gamer, as well as the other imports. We did maths. We went to newsagents and took photos of the stacks of UK PC mags. Our ad sales team were 100% on board, and they were a pretty important ally to have in the real world. I started to plan out what should be in such a mag, without cloning what others were doing. As well as coming up with a name for it. Something that's actually pretty difficult.

THE PITCH AND THE MISSION

We had many talented freelance writers on hand covering PC games for Hyper. Like David Wildgoose and Julian Schoffel, who, like me, had no particular love for consoles. I'd been working my arse off at Hyper for a couple of years, earning the trust of the boss Phil Keir. He saw the enthusiasm and commitment, and eventually he grew to like the whole idea. So, we had the dream, the resources, and enough of a plan to make it happen. The go-ahead was given, and the dream became real.

What to call it? Publishing science, as David mentions in his bit, is arcane bollocks. An 'expert' told me with a straight face that a magazine should have five letters and ideally start with A, so for a month or two the working title was 'Axiom'. What a dumb name. It was my dumb name, and thank you Phil for laughing me out of your office every time I mentioned it. So we knew it had to have 'PC' at the front. Because that's how it was done in the UK – and the poms were absolutely the experts in games mag publishing. After overthinking and whiteboarding until my brain was truly sphagettified, 'Power Play' seemed like the best choice. It meant 'playing, with power'. It meant 'PC playing is power gaming'. It also meant this was our power play into the mag scene to take on the overseas mags and wage war on the newsstands.

PCPP IS GO!

When Phil gave his green light we got things rolling very quickly. We knew what to do, and knew it would be an epic effort, but the love of what we were doing, the confidence it'd rock, and the excitement of building something that would make Aussie games happy drove us on. Writers were readied, a designer was hired. Endless calls and emails to game pubs and devs here and around the world took place to get them excited and behind us with access to betas and gold release CDs so we could always be first with the previews and reviews. Dozens of masthead designs were tried and rejected. We were ready.

In May 1996 issue 1 launched. It went off spectacularly and PCPP was born. An ungodly amount of work by the tiniest team in the first couple of years saw it totally destroy the import mags. I was working from dawn to midnight every day for many months, and I wasn't the only one. But it was worth it. Ads flowed in. Phil made bank. A magazine icon was born, and, finally, there was a source for Australian PC gamers.

And now, an astonishing 300 issues in, we're still playing. Join us over the next few pages as we look back over the years of PC gaming and PCPP's evolution. The memories of some of the former editors are here, and, so are you. Thank you for sticking with us. We do it because we love the games, and because we love you.

ABOVE: Snippets from our issue #1, and some classic early covers.

LEFT: Fun fact: There was actually a typo on the cover of our very first issue! Can you spot it?

HOW TO MAKE A GAME MAG GREAT

WINNING AND LOSING IN THE ART OF MAG CRAFTING.

Putting a games mag is easy. You start with news, then do some previews, add a feature or two, then some reviews, and wrap it all up with some tech. Ez pz. That was the template we started with, but from the get-go we used every precious square inch of the mag and every waking hour to fill it up with as much extra cool original bits and pieces that'd fit. This wasn't just information, we were here to entertain. Powered by a team of seriously talented writers whose stuff was a joy to read, we made PCPP great. For a period it was, truly honestly, the best damn games mag in the world. Let's remember some of our special moments, eh?

IMPORTANT FRIENDS

It didn't take long before the PRs were all over us, lining up interviews, and, quite quickly, bringing big devs out for Australian tours mainly for us. We made proper friends with many. Id Software's Tim Willits and Paul Steed (RIP dude) made almost-annual pilgrimages down under, and we'd hang and laugh and it was great.

Age of Empires Bruce Shelley was one of the nicest and most genuine devs you could ever hope to meet. Loved the game and the man. The same is true of Battlecruiser 3000AD Derek Smart. Much maligned, and yes, true, slightly... aggressively eccentric, but he had all the time in the world for us. Literally. In 1997 we lined up a phone interview with Dr Smart, and Jere Lawrence and I spent at least an hour running through many questions, and his long answers. At the end we thanked each other and ended the call... only to discover that the tape recorder had crapped out and not a single bit of it had been recorded. What a calamity! What to do? There was just one option – call him straight back and be up-front about our incompetence. Which we did, very nervously, but he had a laugh and was a total champ and we spent another hour doing it all over again. I caught up with him at E3 the next year and he was golden, we walked around for an hour just checking out the games and having a great chat. Cheers Dr Smart.

Flights for us were frequent, and often a month wouldn't pass without a trans-Pacific sprint to check out a new game, write it all up, then power on back home as if jetlag didn't exist. PCPP's access was total, the gaming world knew all about our Aussie mag and that gave us the edge. We could get anyone, and that made PCPP such a great info source for you.

> "A PC GAMES MAG'S GOTTA HAVE A COVER DISC, RIGHT? WE SURE DID, AND BY GOLLY WAS IT A LOT OF WORK TO DO, BUT WORTH IT."

A MATTER OF TASTE

PC gaming was slowly falling into categories and niches in the early days of the mag. Today it's safest to run with a big AAA title on the cover, but back then because everything was so disordered it was down to our personal preferences to choose what to run big. It's no secret that I love sims, so yes, we ran a lot of sims on the cover back then. I'm more proud of picking up on the emerging 3D accelerator cards and going hard on that incredible tech. Nobody else did, and it was nearly impossible to find a 3dfx in the shops in the beginning. I like to think we championed that tech here and helped raise awareness of how transformative they were. Shops started picking up stock, and local disties emerged for all the variants.

But PCPP was always a committee. We made sure from the outset to have experts in all genres. That extended to bringing on two different Australian Army Majors to write our flight sim and hardcore mil-sim shooter coverage. Thanks Major Ian and Major Des!

PCPP would never ever start a review with "we don't know much about golf, but here's a golf game review." No way. We had a responsibility to get it right.

Gaming journalism is serious business!

US, AND YOU

From the get-go we built a bridge between the mag, and the readers. We included many sections where you could write in for just about anything, and receive a personal reply in the mag. From game cheats via the mysterious Oracle, to tech assistance. Many were the times we wrote out config.sys and autoexec.bat scripts for readers to get their PC humming just-right for a particular game.

PCPP always had a certain wit and humour, and we were frequently quite hilarious. Fact. The letters we got vibed right into that, and every month the letters were sparkles of genius that we loved reading and putting in the mag. You guys truly rock.

Then, when the internet took off, the forums were launched, and me oh my did they boom. It was incredible to talk to you all there, day and night, and enjoy seeing you all make friends under the same umbrella of the love of games and tech.

Heck, for a while there we even had a fax-based game tips and cheats service. 'Fax on Demand'. That didn't last.

THE DISC

A PC games mag's gotta have a cover disc, right? We sure did, and by golly was it a lot of work to do, but worth it. So much so that we had to hire a full time editor just for that. Cheers Harry, you magnificent man. Jere also handled the CD for a while, and loved hiding easter eggs in one-pixel clickable hot spots. I'm pretty sure nobody ever discovered any of these.

The PCPP cover CD also became world famous one particular month, and remains so to this day. Because... we accidentally put a beta version of Master of Orion III on it, thinking it was a public demo. No, it actually wasn't. It was special and confidential preview code just for us that wasn't ever supposed to be seen by anyone but PCPP to write a preview. We blamed a miscommunication with the local PRs. They blamed us. Thankfully war was never declared and the tale now exists only as a funny anecdote in issue 300 of PC PowerPlay.

PC PowerPlay
16 GAMES!
645 MEGS OF GAMING GOODNESS!
SIN
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Playable Demo
PC PowerPlay DEMO CD
39
DEMOS
Full version!
UNREAL
The classic shooter, better than Quake2, yours for free!
FULL CONTENTS PAGE 110
Massive singleplayer demo!
MASTER OF ORION 3
Dominate and oppress more than fifty cubic parsecs of the universe!
PC PowerPlay
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PLUS Mods, Utils & Skins
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COMPETITIONS

WHO'S THAT GIRL?

LARA LOOKALIKE WINNERS!

Back in the Good Old Days, playing dressups for the sake of a computer game was an exclusively male and mostly medieval affair. Today though, we've got Mums dressing up as Lara Croft! This is one of those simultaneously good and bad things. Seeing as we're responsible for this nonsense, we've no choice but to embrace the idea enthusiastically and make out, somehow, that this clearly bent behavior is somehow normal.

As the days slipped slowly by, the PCPP crew grew accustomed to the daily mail drop of more and more readers running around the local park with a plastic gun. Towards the end of the month, we'd reached the stage where we would simply refuse to do any work until we'd checked out the latest batch. On behalf of the entire Next Publishing staff, I'd just like to say that this competition brought us much happiness. Thanks to all who entered, tough luck to the non-winners, congrats to the actual winners, and hey, just because the comp's over, doesn't mean you have to ditch the outfit...

1st

Jodie Britt - sent in by hubbie Travis.

No tree will get in my way!

Kerrie Cox, tree exterminator.

Kate Featherston, New Zea

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Skin Of The Dog

Shame on you! Printing a picture with blatant nudity on it. Did you realise that skin of the dog in your Wheel of Time preview (PCPP#43 p44) is made up of naked ladies? Look! There's one upside down one on the front leg and another next to its head. Ignorance can be the only excuse...

Nemesis, Email

And for all those who missed it the first time round, here it is again...

FAR LEFT: The 'Lara Croft lookalike contest' was a huge hit with readers.

LEFT: One of our cover CDs accidentally included the beta for Master of Orion 3. That wasn't supposed to be there...

BELOW: PCPP had friends like Paul Steed and Dr Derek Smart PhD.

CD GUIDE

The games people play. Now you can too.

CD Tech

Redneck Rampage

Beavis and Butthead

Cavewars

Blam Machinehead

Look Up = PGUP or KEYPAD 9
Look Down = PGDN or KEYPAD 3
Look Left = INS or KEYPAD 0
Look Right = DEL or KEYPAD .
Strafe Left = ,
Strafe Right = .
Aim Up = HOME or KEYPAD 7
Aim Down = END or KEYPAD 1
Center View = KEYPAD 5

Bustamove 2

Atomic Bomberman

Star Command

Street Racer

Realms of the Haunting

DeathDrome

Destruction Derby 2

Flight Unlimited for Win 95

Blue Ice

PC PowerPlay

CD PowerPlay
CD#58 2CDs
1.2GIGS OF TOP DEMOS
DIABLO II
See for yourself why this is the most talked about game of the year!
PLAYABLE DEMO!
COLIN McRAE RALLY 2.0
Power sliding perfection
HUGE DEMO!
MECHWARRIOR 4
The big robots are back
EXCLUSIVE!
FALLOUT TACTICS
Nuclear warfare
ANIME ACTION!
ONI
From the makers of Halo
PLAY FASTER! 12 ESSENTIAL VIDEOCARD DRIVERS
TRIBES
Online action at its best - full version!
ALICE TWISTED 3D ACTION

DEREK SMART

The Battlecruiser guy

Last of the LONE PROGRAMMERS

Derek Smart is the epitome of the legacy that is the "lone programmer". If you thought that mega corporations pumping out consistent mediocrity and treating you with contempt was the reality now and for the future, then take a look at this guy. A real fighter in no uncertain terms. Derek Smart's goal to create the most absorbing and complete game ever has cost him his wife, millions of dollars and seven years of his life. Now, reeling after the immoral actions of his last publisher, Take 2, releasing an unfinished game, he has stuck to his guns and is determined to fix it for the many buyers out there.

This month, join us with a world first exclusive interview with the man himself, Derek Smart, and his media manager John Stegenga, where we put the hard questions to them.

How did you keep up with the progress of the technology and apply it to BC3K?

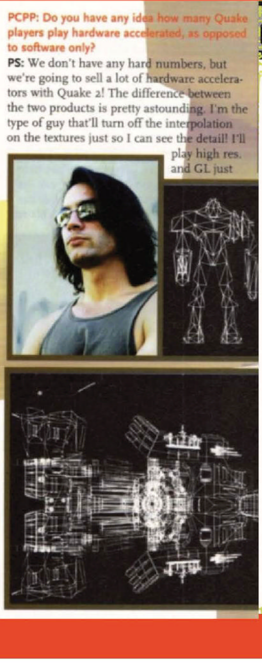
It was an uphill climb, because when I started I couldn't draw a 3D box to save my life. Back in those days the art of development was stuck with a select group of people run by large companies and if you weren't in the know of one of the boys so to speak you were classed as an outsider. So you really couldn't get access to the technology at all.

I had no other choice but to start from the ground up and work my way from there. I had to educate myself and engross myself in many books. I now have over a thousand books on every aspect of graphics. I basically read everything from scratch where 2D and 3D graphics are concerned.

Artificial Intelligence was still in its infancy, and as I was studying it at the time at University, I decided

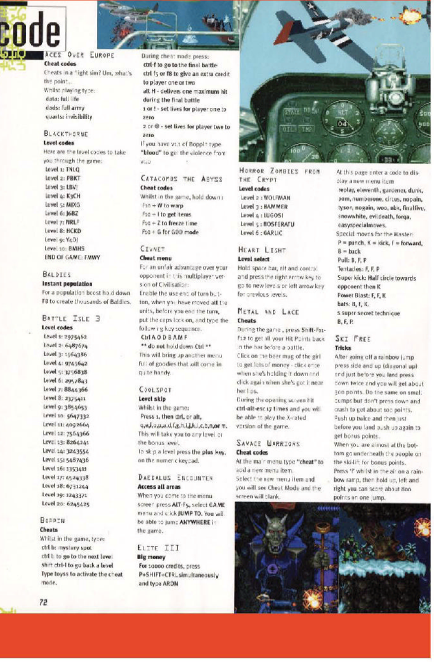
What was the inspiration for Battlecruiser 3000AD?

PC PowerPlay



PCPP: Do you have any idea how many Quake players play hardware accelerated, as opposed to software only?

PS: We don't have any hard numbers, but we're going to sell a lot of hardware accelerators with Quake 2! The difference between the two products is pretty astounding. I'm the type of guy that'll turn off the interpolation on the textures just so I can see the detail! I'll play high res. and GL just



In the beginning

THE WHITE COVER ERA

DAVID WILDGOOSE, OUR SECOND EDITOR AND AN ISSUE 1 ORIGINAL LOOKS BACK AT HIS TIME AS EDITOR, SPANNING 2000 TO 2012.

I remember feeling excited when Ben told me he was leaving Hyper magazine sometime in early 1996. At the time I had been writing freelance for Hyper, spending one day a week in the office reviewing whatever console games no one else wanted to review and trying (and, one fateful day, failing) to not blow up the import Japanese Sega Saturn. I was excited because I thought Ben leaving might mean more work for me. As it turned out, I was soon doubly excited when he told me he was leaving to launch a dedicated PC games magazine.

SONIC SCHMONIC

My memory of how long it took to get that first issue out the door is understandably hazy. But it felt like no time at all. One day we were on Hyper, digging trenches in the nascent 32-bit console wars, and the next day we were celebrating a ceasefire, relieved to never have to think about Sonic the Hedgehog again. I can't even remember what I wrote in that first issue. Did I review a Descent game? Possibly. Some sort of first-person sci-fi shooter from Bethesda? Some things have not changed, it seems.

The only concrete recollection I have of that first issue is when I was told the magazine was going to be called PC PowerPlay. Previously, Ben had let slip that his boss, the magazine's publisher, liked the words "player" and "power" and he felt the masthead would benefit from the inclusion of a word such as these. Or both, perhaps. When I heard that "PC PowerPlay" was the final decision I stifled a laugh. It sounded a little silly, a little too on-the-nose. As I would come to learn years later when trying to name publications myself, names are hard. They all sound silly until you get used to them.

MAKING IT MINE

After a few years freelancing while I completed a very useful degree in Art History, I finally joined PCPP as a full-time member of staff in early 1999. Ben was still editor, and

INTERNET UNDERGROUND MP3, DIVX &

PC GAMES AND TECHNO
100% AUSTRALIAN

PC Powe

WN
SS 2

Thrills, spills and kills! We test drive Microsoft's hi-octane action racer!

HARDWARE HEAVEN

MP3 PLAYERS TESTED

Plus the Pentium 4 unveiled, Duron versus Celeron deathmatch and all the latest hardware news

LOCAL FOCUS

AUSSIE GAME STUDIOS

Ratbag shows off its next generation games
Blue Tongue tackles Starship Troopers
Irrational's Freedom Force diary

AGE OF EMPIRES II THE CONQUERORS

NO CDs?
Please ask your newsagent

WIN A GEFORCE 6800GT + DOOM 3!

2 CDs

100% AUSTRALIAN CONTENT

PC PowerPlay

THE KILLER AUSSIE SHOOTER!

Exclusive hands on with TRIBES VENGEANCE

SPECIAL REPORT!
WARGAMES
Have military sims gone too far?

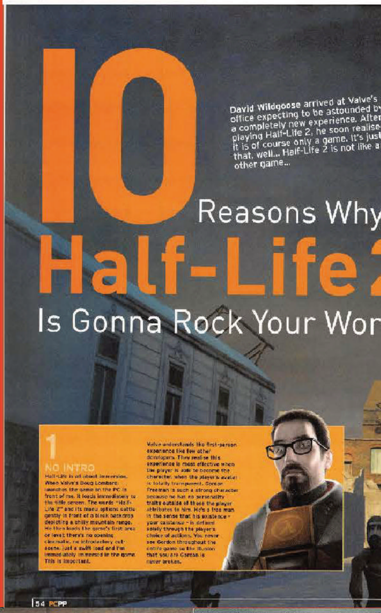
PAID TO PLAY
We take a Design Class with the lucky few!

POWERTEST!
THE GREAT VIDEOCARD ROUND-UP
Now it's NVIDIA's turn! 11 cards benchmarked!

WARHAMMER COMES ALIVE
Dawn of War is the year's most visceral strategy game

NO CDS?
ask your newsagent

next GAMING

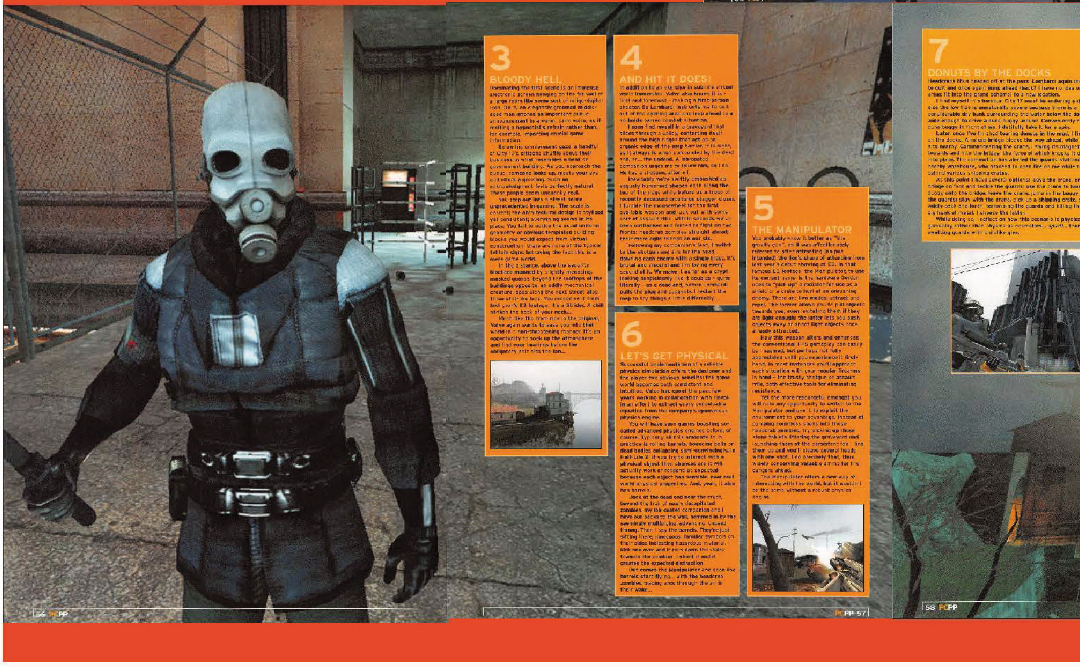


10
Reasons Why
Half-Life 2
Is Gonna Rock Your Wor

David Wildgoose arrived at Valve's office expecting to be astounded b
a completely new experience. After playing Half-Life 2, he soon realise
it is of course only a game. It's just that, well... Half-Life 2 is not like a
other game...

1 NO INTRO

54 PCPP



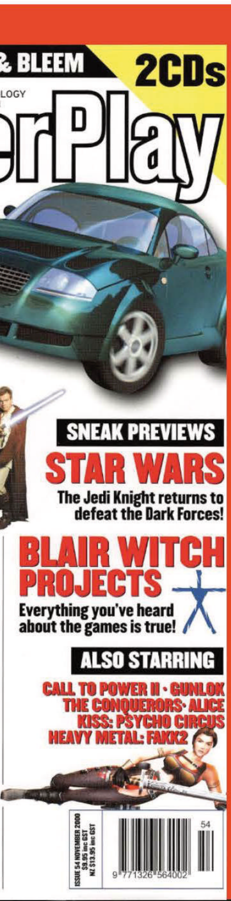
3 BLOODY HELL

4 AND HIT IT DOES!

5 THE MANIPULATOR

6 LET'S GET PHYSICAL

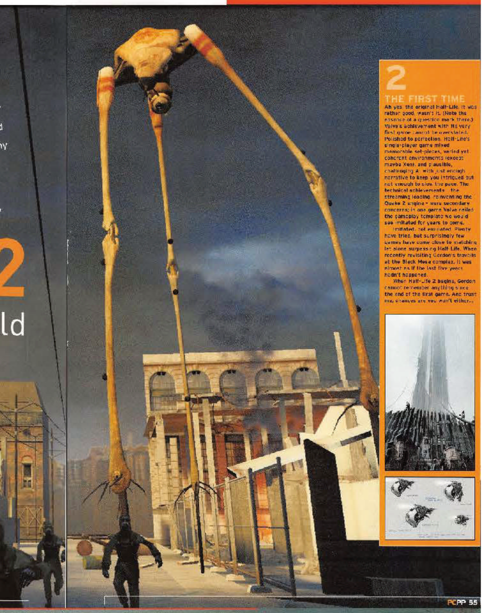
7 DONUTS BY THE DOCKS



TOP: Make David happy and love Deus Ex and The Last Express as much as he does.

LEFT: All PCPP eras have their own distinctive cover styles.

LEFT: David got the scoop on Half-Life 2, and predicted greatness.



8
METAL STORM
9
ROLLERBALL

he graciously indulged then-deputy editor March Stepnik and I in running things like a 10-page interview with Warren Spector. And, bless him, Ben didn't even bat an eyelid when March and I wanted to give our favourite games, the Thiefs, the System Shocks and the Deus Exs of this world, some exceptionally high review scores. His generosity did not extend, however, to permitting us to put these games on the front cover of the mag. In retrospect, giving the cover treatment to some random flight sim rather than, say, Deus Ex feels like an error. History, I suggest, has got my back on that one.

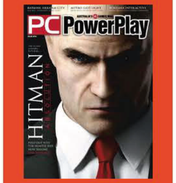
That's not to say my views on how a PCPP cover should look were always unimpeachable. Sometime in 2000, after Ben bailed to some media startup that never really got started, I took the editor's reins and proceeded to preside over what came to be known as the White Cover Era. This aesthetic choice was not mine, I hasten to add. My boss, the publisher at the time (and not the one who loved "player" and "power"), felt that relying on one dominant cover image would alienate potential readers who were not interested in that game. Instead of placing all eggs in one basket, the thinking went, it was better to hurl as much shit on the cover as possible in the hope that something – DEAR GOD PLEASE JUST ONE THING – would catch the eye as the potential reader browsed the newsstand. Did it work? Who knows. Publishing science is all crackpot theories ("Green doesn't sell!" "Big numbers do sell!" "But only odd numbers!"). The only thing I know for sure is that those covers sucked ass. And made for some funny/awkward conversations with PR people when I'd tell them we had decided to put their game on the cover this month and then they'd see the issue and their game was a 2-inch square of blue text on white.

"I TOOK THE EDITOR'S REINS AND PROCEEDED TO PRESIDE OVER WHAT CAME TO BE KNOWN AS THE WHITE COVER ERA."

LOST BUT NEVER FORGOTTEN

From 2000 to 2012 I served as PCPP editor in three separate stints. In the third stint from 2010 to 2012 I made amends for the White Cover Era with some gorgeous full-bleed images gracing the front of the mag. The Syndicate and Hitman covers were particularly lovely. And I finally put Deus Ex on the cover – twice! Curiously, I have little to recount from the second stint, which I'm pretty sure ran from sometime in 2003 to about halfway through 2005. I'd go and check my collection of back issues, but of course I didn't keep any. PCPP's previous publishing house, Next Media, was lax when it came to preserving a magazine's history. We tried to maintain a physical library, but many issues inevitably disappeared. Backup files were lost in office moves or simply with the turnover in production staff. In my third shift as PCPP editor, we tried to reprint some old reviews for an anniversary issue but found many of them had gone missing. We ended up sourcing some scans from several life-saving and far more diligent readers. It's amazing how many people I still encounter to this day who tell me they have a stack of old PCPPs with my name in them somewhere in their home. It's weird. I mean, it feels good to hear how something I worked on meant enough to someone that they've hung onto it for years, even decades. But it's still weird.

When Ben asked me to write something for this issue, I was excited again. Excited to hear that PCPP still existed, for one. Excited that a thing – a bloody print games magazine of all things – that had been a significant part of my life for so many years was still kicking. And excited to reminisce about that time and get the opportunity to write one more article under the PCPP masthead.



ABOVE: Another beautiful PCPP cover. Damn we were good.

TECH MAKES IT TICK

FORMER TECH HEAD AND DEPUTY ED BENNETT RING (2003 – 2006) IS ALL ABOUT THE HARDWARE, JUST AS EVERY TRUE PC GAMER IS.

The Dremel in my hand whirs to life, set to work cutting a large rectangular window through the thick steel side of the beige PC case. Two more holes are gouged out of the top, becoming the new home for 80mm fans to extract the heat caused by the overclocked CPU within. Once the metalwork is complete, I spray a coat of primer, then two of satin black, and my ugly monstrosity has become a black Obelisk of Awesome. The final touch is the installation of a piece of Perspex, hewn into shape with the sharp teeth of my handsaw, lined with an RGB strip posted from a boutique shop in Taiwan. A week after the beige case arrives, and my case mod is done, ready to haul to a LAN party along with my impressively large 21" 1600 x 1200 Sony CRT monitor. Carefully strapped with seatbelts into the back of the car, surrounded by pillows to ensure everything arrives intact, it's a far-cry from the mass-produced, laser-cut, LED-festooned cases of 2023. But in this year of our Lord Gabe, 2002, it's like showing up to a Corolla dealership in a Lambo.

FOR THE LOVE OF THE BOX

It's not merely my custom-made case that inspires envy from the folks I'll be shooting in Counter-Strike over the next 24 hours, surviving on a well-balanced diet of Red Bull and Skittles to stave off sleep. The top-tier components within, which I'm lucky enough to receive early thanks to my role as PC PowerPlay's hardware reviewer/deputy editor, are enough to make any 486 DX-100 owner weep. Intel's brand-new Pentium 4 2.53B resides in the hot-seat after wrestling AMD's mighty Athlon XP from its top spot as the gaming CPU of choice, its powerful single core purring along with a blazing 3GHz overclock, paired with a staggering 512MB of DDR SDRAM. If I inhale hard enough, I can still smell the freshly minted PCB of the ATI Radeon 9700 Pro video card, which had recently surpassed NVIDIA's GeForce4 Ti 4600 out of the top slot. The next day is a blur of bullets, laughter, and snappy 20ms pings, something few of us were used to at home thanks to 56k modems being the predominant method for getting online at the time.

"I CAN STILL SMELL THE FRESHLY MINTED PCB OF THE ATI RADEON 9700 PRO VIDEO CARD"

21 years later, I have to admit that – despite PC gaming technology moving into the realm of science fiction – the death of LAN parties resulting from the widespread availability of broadband still makes me a little sad. Then I remember that my gigabit fibre is 17,857.14 times faster than my old 56kbps modem, that this paradigm shift in connectivity has moved gaming from being a solitary to a social affair, and I'm not so sad anymore.

PC GAMING FOREVER

In the intervening years between then and now my belly has gotten bigger, my hair greyer and certain parts of my anatomy have dropped even closer to my knees. The many wrinkles surrounding my eyes suggest the passage of time hasn't always been kind, but the blessing of being paid for almost 20 years to write about games, and the tech that powers them, have seen me wake up grateful for nearly every day of my adult life. Approaching the slightly terrifying benchmark of 50 years old, I still game nearly every day, often into the wee hours of the morning when blockbusters like Starfield or Elden Ring drag me away from reality. Being so passionate about my beloved pastime means I've always got something to look forward to; I have a silicon and software Christmas eve multiple times each and every year. My wallet may be in more pain than ever before, but when it comes to bucks per

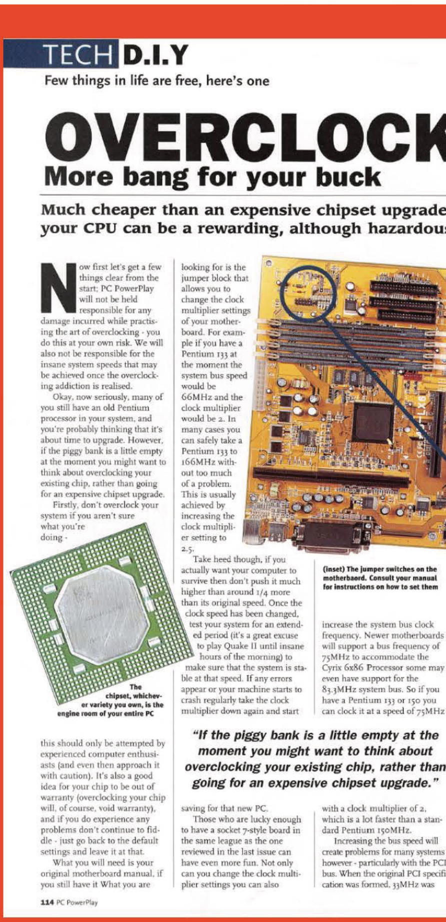
PowerColor

Radeon 9800 Pro

■ **Price:** $800 ■ **Distributor:** Altech ■ **URL:** www.altech.com.au

PCPP Score

Power: 5 **Value:** 3 **Extras:** 5



TECH **D.I.Y**

Few things in life are free, here's one

OVERCLOCK

More bang for your buck

Much cheaper than an expensive chipset upgrade your CPU can be a rewarding, although hazardou

Now first let's get a few things clear from the start; PC PowerPlay will not be held responsible for any damage incurred while practising the art of overclocking - you do this at your own risk. We will also not be responsible for the insane system speeds that may be achieved once the overclocking addiction is realised.

Okay, now seriously, many of you still have an old Pentium processor in your system, and you're probably thinking that it's about time to upgrade. However, if the piggy bank is a little empty at the moment you might want to think about overclocking your existing chip, rather than going for an expensive chipset upgrade.

Firstly, don't overclock your system if you aren't sure what you're doing - this should only be attempted by experienced computer enthusiasts (and even then approach it with caution). It's also a good idea for your chip to be out of warranty (overclocking your chip will, of course, void warranty), and if you do experience any problems don't continue to fiddle - just go back to the default settings and leave it at that.

What you will need is your original motherboard manual, if you still have it What you are looking for is the jumper block that allows you to change the clock multiplier settings of your motherboard. For example if you have a Pentium 133 at the moment the system bus speed would be 66MHz and the clock multiplier would be 2. In many cases you can safely take a Pentium 133 to 166MHz without too much of a problem. This is usually achieved by increasing the clock multiplier setting to 2.5.

Take heed though, if you actually want your computer to survive then don't push it much higher than around 1/4 more than its original speed. Once the clock speed has been changed, test your system for an extended period (it's a great excuse to play Quake II until insane hours of the morning) to make sure that the system is stable at that speed. If any errors appear or your machine starts to crash regularly take the clock multiplier down again and start saving for that new PC.

Those who are lucky enough to have a socket 7-style board in the same league as the one reviewed in the last issue can have even more fun. Not only can you change the clock multiplier settings you can also increase the system bus clock frequency. Newer motherboards will support a bus frequency of 75MHz to accommodate the Cyrix 6x86 Processor some may even have support for the 83.3MHz system bus. So if you have a Pentium 133 or 150 you can clock it at a speed of 75MHz with a clock multiplier of 2, which is a lot faster than a standard Pentium 150MHz.

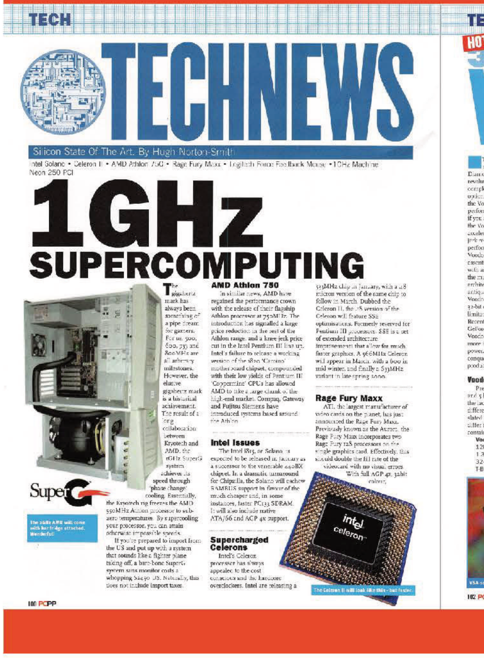
Increasing the bus speed will create problems for many systems however - particularly with the PCI bus. When the original PCI specifi cation was formed, 33MHz was

"If the piggy bank is a little empty at the moment you might want to think about overclocking your existing chip, rather than going for an expensive chipset upgrade."

(inset) The jumper switches on the motherbaord. Consult your manual for instructions on how to set them

The chipset, whichever variety you own, is the engine room of your entire PC

114 PC PowerPlay



TECH

TECHNEWS

Silicon State Of The Art. By Hugh Norton-Smith

Intel Solano • Celeron II • AMD Athlon 750 • Rage Fury Maxx • Logitech Force Feedback Mouse • 1GHz Machine Neon 250 PCI

1GHz SUPERCOMPUTING

The gigahertz mark has always been something of a pipe dream for gamers. For us, 500, 600, 733 and 800MHz are all arbitrary milestones. However, the elusive gigahertz mark is a historical achievement. The result of a long collaboration between Kryotech and AMD, the 1GHz SuperG system achieves its speed through 'phase change' cooling. Essentially, the Kryotech rig freezes the AMD 550MHz Athlon processor to sub-zero temperatures. By supercooling your processor, you can attain otherwise impossible speeds.

If you're prepared to import from the US and put up with a system that sounds like a fighter plane taking off, a bare-bone SuperG system sans monitor costs a whopping $2250 US. Naturally, this does not include import taxes.

AMD Athlon 750

In similar news, AMD have regained the performance crown with the release of their flagship Athlon processor at 750MHz. The introduction has signalled a large price reduction in the rest of the Athlon range, and a knee jerk price cut in the Intel Pentium III line up. Intel's failure to release a working version of the i820 'Camino' motherboard chipset, compounded with their low yields of Pentium III 'Coppermine' CPUs has allowed AMD to take a large chunk of the high-end market. Compaq, Gateway and Fujitsu Siemens have introduced systems based around the Athlon.

Intel Issues

The Intel i815, or Solano, is expected to be released in January as a successor to the venerable 440BX chipset. In a dramatic turnaround for Chipzilla, the Solano will eschew RAMBUS support in favour of the much cheaper and, in some instances, faster PC133 SDRAM. It will also include native ATA/66 and AGP 4x support.

Supercharged Celerons

Intel's Celeron processer has always appealed to the cost conscious and the hardcore overclockers. Intel are releasing a 533MHz chip in January, with a .18 micron version of the same chip to follow in March. Dubbed the Celeron II, the .18 version of the Celeron will feature SSE optimisations. Formerly reserved for Pentium III processors, SSE is a set of extended architecture improvements that allow for much faster graphics. A 566MHz Celeron will appear in March, with a 600 in mid winter, and finally a 633MHz variant in late spring 2000.

Rage Fury Maxx

ATI, the largest manufacturer of video cards on the planet, has just announced the Rage Fury Maxx. Previously known as the Aurora, the Rage Fury Maxx incorporates two Rage Fury 128 processors on the single graphics card. Effectively, this should double the fill rate of the videocard with no visual errors. With full AGP 4x, 32bit colour,

The 1GHz AMD will come with bar fridge attached. Wonderful!

The Celeron II will look like this - but faster.

100 PCPP

TECH

THE BEAST

In association with Altech Computers

CPU, MEMORY AND MOTHERBOARD

VIDEO, AUDIO AND CONNECTIVITY

STORAGE AND OPTICAL

DISPLAY, INPUT AND COSMETICS

BEAST VALUE: $11362

IT-YOURSELF

N PARTIES

do when you have friends

HOTWARE

Hercules Stingray 128/3D Video Card

3DFX BITES BACK WITH

VOODOO 4/5

ONE BILLION PIXELS PER SECOND

HELLO! MY NAME IS THEO

FAR LEFT : Good gear and tinkering with the bits was core to a PC gamer's life.

LEFT: The Beast was the best of the best, and so was our mascot Theo.

BELOW: LAN parties were the best way to hang with gaming mates, share files, and occasionally actually play.

hours of fun, gaming is still one of the cheapest forms of entertainment around.

As a technology journalist specialising in gaming hardware starting in 2000, I've been lucky enough to travel the world with a front-row seat to the leaps, bounds and occasional stumbles that the boffins at Intel, AMD, Nvidia and myriad other companies have delivered in the years since Sydney hosted the Olympics. While we haven't quite reached the photorealism that Nvidia's head PR poncho told me would be here by 2020, I really can't complain. A single gun model in Cyberpunk 2077 contains more polygons than the entire scene in 2002's Medal of Honor, each one covered in realistic PBR materials that react to real-time ray-traced lighting. HDR colour and the infinite contrast of my 4K OLED screen present these to my retina at an astonishing 120 frames per second, and if a frame drops here or there, VRR has banished screen tearing to the past. And don't even get me started on VR, a technology that I still believe will become the predominant form of gaming. It's been 31 years since The Lawnmower Man tantalised me with the possibilities of VR, and a decade since I first strapped a Rift CV1 to my face, but VR still has a long, long way to go.

ENDLESS EVOLUTION

Despite their performance increasing by orders of magnitude over the last 20 years, today's PCs are easier than ever to build. What used to take a couple of days of fiddling with opaque BIOS settings and incompatible components can now be done in a few short hours. Bloody knuckles are a thing of the past, but in the process some of the satisfaction that came from creating a one-of-a-kind PC has gone with them. Yet it's a pretty good trade-off when I consider the advances made in the realm of graphics and gameplay since those times. Every hour I don't have to spend tweaking memory timing is an hour that I can spend out-flying a virtual Tomcat pilot. Gaming is better than ever, and it will continue to get even better. Looking back at the last 20 years has made me even more excited for the next 20. Look up GunSlinger in 2043, and I'll see you in the metaverse, or the neural network, or whatever it is that we'll call our virtual gaming space in the year 2043. I'll be there, and I know you will too.

ENTERING THE GAME

ANTHONY FORDHAM, PCPP'S EDITOR IN 2001-2003 AND AGAIN IN 2007-2010, ON HOW HE SHAPED THE MAG, AND HOW IT SHAPED HIM.

When I arrived at the offices of PCPP in late 2000, fresh and dewy-eyed from the hospitality industry clutching nothing but a tax file number declaration form and a review of Star Trek: New Worlds, PC gaming was on the verge of its first great transition.

As related, the years from 1994 (when PC commoditisation really kicked off in Australia) to 1999 were a heady time for people selling advertising space for PC games. With over a dozen game publishers and distributors to approach, each issue of the mag was stuffed full of weird games and weirder ads.

From 2000 though, things were about to change. Game publishing and distribution would quickly consolidate around six or seven key publishers – some with names we recognise today like EA and Activision, and others with names half-forgotten like Vivendi and THQ.

This made us do weird things, and make some questionable decisions. But it also made 'videogaming' a part of the mainstream media, turning it from a niche curiosity into a multi-billion dollar sector that would soon eclipse the Hollywood box office.

ENTERING THE MODERN ERA

With the departure of David Wildgoose from the editor's chair in mid-2001 it was time for me to step up, because this was the late summer of the golden age of magazine publishing, and back then, being a deputy editor was actually a pretty strong guarantee that you'd be the mag's next editor.

> "I TOOK THE EDITOR'S REINS AND PROCEEDED TO PRESIDE OVER WHAT CAME TO BE KNOWN AS THE WHITE COVER ERA."

It was also the golden age of the internet Forum, precursor to actual social media as we labour under it today. And boy did I have fun fighting with readers over whether or not Deus Ex: Invisible War deserved a 98 (Wildgoose made me score it that high, your honour!) or the now hyper-obscure Ironstorm a 96 (I was desperate for something, anything that wasn't another Unreal-engine game, and apart from that I have no excuse, your honour!). Wait did I say fun? It was awful, but fortunately there were hundreds of other readers who came to the Forums just to talk PC games, to make up for it. Back in 2002, and before Facebook – let alone Discord – it was one of only a few places you could hang out with Aussies online and talk about PC games (as opposed to games in general).

As editor my solidest move was expanding the tech section from a handful of pages to, well, a whole section. I'm also proud to take ownership of PCPP traditions like MyPC and Reshuffle. Ah Reshuffle, where we'd force whoever was tech editor at the time to get in six identical videocards (nobody called them GPUs yet) and write 200 words about each one and how it was different. We learned a LOT about the minute and meaningless differences between a Leadtek and a [looks at notes] Hercules?

THE XPERIMENT

A, um, less-solid achievement of mine was the ill-fated Xbox section. I introduced this in 2002 in time for the launch of the original Xbox in Australia, mostly on the instruction of the publisher and advertising department, but hey if we blamed the publisher and advertising department for every bad thing that happened in the mag we'd [looks at notes] oh wait no that is what we did, we always blamed them.

Anyway, readers reacted strongly to the Xbox section. Many sent angry emails saying get that console filth out of my magazine. One reader diligently cut out the entire section and sent it back to us via mail, for all four of the issues in which it appeared.

What the "Xperiment" did teach us, or perhaps reassure us, was that in 2002 there was still very much an appetite for PC gaming in Australia, as something that was distinct and unique from gaming in general. Given the rise in sales of PS2 games (selling more than The Sims for the first time in 2002), we could be forgiven for being nervous about the viability of a "PC" gaming magazine. But it was a misplaced fear. PC gaming wasn't going anywhere.

2007-2010, BANNER YEARS

After a sabbatical in Canberra as the magazine's "associate editor" (which

20 100
3
100
100

LEFT: An Xbox. Not a PC.

ABOVE LEFT: Crysis was a huge favourite with the whole team. Just beautiful.

ABOVE: Ironstorm. Not quite as good as we first thought.

meant editing the tech section from a house in Melba, and also not being allowed to review Half Life 2 even though I was the only person on the team with a GeForce 6800 Ultra [shakes fist] Wiiiildgoose! – man did Lost Coast look good on that thing a year later but I digress)... wait what was I talking about?

Anyway, I returned to Sydney in late 2007, just as then-editor Timothy “C” Best was about to catapult himself into the heady stratosphere of actually developing games instead of merely writing about them. The slot re-opened and I slid into it like a SNES cartridge sliding into a SNES. And I didn’t even have to blow the dust off, because 2008 would turn out to be a bit of a banner year for PC gaming.

But first 2007 had to be rung out with my personal favourite issue – PCPP#147 . Christmas 2007 (yep we did 13 a year) had Crysis as the lead review, and Valve’s Orange Box as the second. Can you imagine? Half-Life 2: Episodes 1 and 2, Portal, and Team Fortress 2. It was a smorgasbord – no a cornucopia of gaming goodness, all mashed into a heady 30 days of our art director Glen Downey playing the opening beach mission in Crysis over and over to see how many different objects he could use to wipe out the soldiers at the first camp. Yes, chickens were thrown as useful distractions. No, you can’t grab sharks.

As for 2008 being a banner year, how about this for a run of covers, from PCPP#141 onward: StarCraft 2, Fallout 3, BioShock, WOW: Wrath of the Lich King, Command & Conquer 3, Crysis, Gears of War, COD4, Assassin’s Creed, Red Alert 3, Mass Effect, Age of Conan, StarCraft 2 again (the review), Diablo 3 (live from Paris) and finally Far Cry 2 (yes, there was also a cover for the “FPS future of Command & Conquer”, Tiberium in there but... eh as Primus once said, they can’t all be zingers).

But all good things end and by 2010 I was ready to move on to the even weirder and more pedantic world of Popular Science magazine, where instead of being crucified for writing about Xbox in a PC mag, I would get crucified for using “kph” (only “km/h” exists you know) and accidentally captioning a spider as “poisonous” (because in Danish, the word “gift” means both poison and ven... oh look it doesn’t matter). But I kept contributing to PCPP until 2018, because who wouldn’t want to be a part of such an important Australian tradition? Websites come and go, and YouTubers will on Tuesday embrace what on Monday they condemned, but magazines man... we put our convictions down in black and white, and occasionally ear-searing magenta on yellow.

ADS AREN’T WHAT THEY USED TO BE...

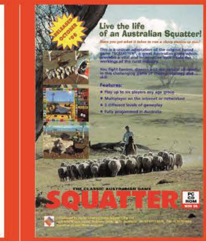
Back in the day ad creatives thought they understood gamers.

LOTUS...
bad ... sexy ... bitch
WANNA PLAY?
meat puppet
ALSO AVAILABLE PC CD ROM

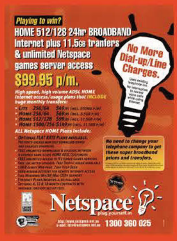
ADS FOR LADS
In the 1990s game ads were pitched at males, thankfully advertisers have now realised gaming is for everyone.

Microsoft Windows 95
gives you the boot to kick some serious butt.
Microsoft

WINDOWS 95 IS COOL, GOT IT?
Get Windows 95 and game with attitude. They said. We’ll give them a point for the boot pun, though.


Live the life of an Australian Squatter!
SQUATTER

SQUATTER
The famous Squatter ad ran for many months in PCPP. We hope you all bought a copy and still play it today.


Playing to win?
HOME 512/128 24hr BROADBAND Internet plus 11.5Gb transfers & unlimited Netspace games server access
$99.95 p/m.
No More Dial-up/Line Charges.
Netspace
1300 360 025

FUNNY OLD TECH
Having a laugh at the clumsy old tech we used to use is de rigeuer in a magazine retrospective.

MOD SQUAD
PCPP was always big on personalising one’s rig, and for a long time RGB was the exception not the rule.

Sims 2
OUT NOW!

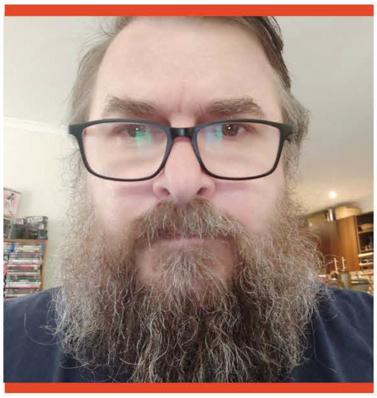
EDGY ADS
Early game ads had a certain adolescent humour, and even the conservative EA didn’t hold back on the escapades. Some ads definately crossed the line, though, and the editors refused to run some of the more risqué material.

MAGAZINE SATISFACTION

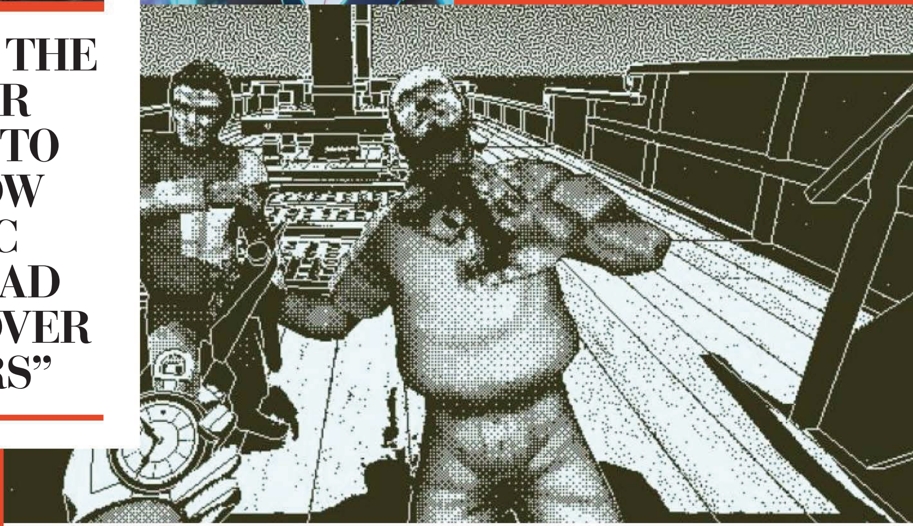
DANIEL WILKES JOINED THE PCPP CREW IN 2000, AND WENT ON TO TAKE THE BIG CHAIR FROM 2016 UNTIL 2018.

PC PowerPlay literally saved me when I was at a pretty low point. I was working in a crap job that I hated, and after a particularly tough day, I quit. I did love gaming and PC hardware though, and had become a bit of an expert in both. The next day on a whim I applied for the role of tech editor for PCPP. A week and a bit later I was hired. I stayed with PCPP and its sister magazines for the best part of two decades after that.

Between early 2000 and 2018 I had some form of involvement in PC PowerPlay, as a contributor, staff member or as the one steering the ship. Over that time I saw a huge amount of change. When I first started as tech editor, AGP slots were just becoming the main thing for video cards, and one of the most powerful cards around was the Voodoo 4. There was a spare at work and I had to cut a hole in my computer case to fit the damn thing in. By the time I left, PCI was everything and cards had become fatter, not longer.



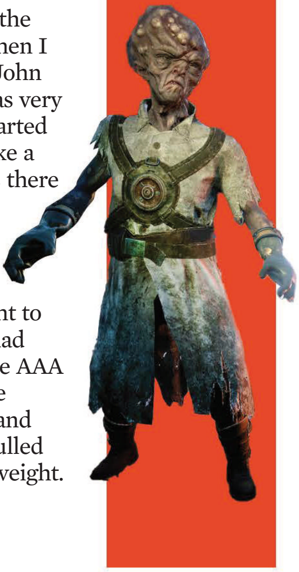
> “SITTING IN THE BIG CHAIR BROUGHT TO LIGHT HOW MUCH PC GAMING HAD CHANGED OVER THE YEARS”



In all that time however, one thing didn’t change. Malky. Malcolm Campbell, designer extraordinaire and fixture of the games magazine industry. When I inherited the big chair from John Gillooly, the PC landscape was very different from when I first started on the magazine, but it felt like a homecoming, and Malky was there to greet me.

GREAT GAMES, BIG AND SMALL

Sitting in the big chair brought to light how much PC gaming had changed over the years. While AAA titles were still the core of the games industry, indie games and the output of small studios pulled far more than their share of weight. For every Tomb Raider, Total War or Assassin’s Creed there was an incredible game built by a small team.



Some of the most memorable smaller games during my tenure include the incredible meta, side scrolling action game, ICEY was a revelation, taking the best parts of the Stanley Parable and Bayonetta and somehow seamlessly combining them. 1979 Revolution: Black Friday used narrative adventure game design to humanise a relatively unknown part of modern history. Return of the Obra Dinn played on perception, memory and perspective to tell the story of an intriguing nautical disaster. Mutant Year Zero: Road to Eden was the best X-Com game in years and had a charming talking pigman to boot.

I’m no longer in print media and I miss it every day. There’s nothing quite like holding the first copy of a new magazine in your hands, knowing you did that. As fun as it was, working on games mags was also a hard and demanding job. Deadlines are mother and father, and you can’t disrespect your family. Despite working many weekends and late nights and barely taking any time off in nearly 20 years due to constant and looming deadlines, I would do it again in a heartbeat.

THE REUNION

MY GOD IT'S FULL OF... WELL NOT STARS EXACTLY, MORE SORT OF CURIOUS BROWN DWARFS

We had arranged to meet at the North Indian Diner in Newtown, our ancient haunt, to speak of times past, and be Men, because my rich friend Silver had read a Medium post about how men needed to reconnect after the pandemic.

I hadn't seen him since 2021, and of course he still looked magnificent, standing there all grey-bearded on King St looking in confusion from his Pixel Fold to the front of what was clearly no longer the North Indian Diner, but was instead now a fusion Korean/Mexican gin bar named GorgeTakei's (sic).

"I'm not sure what happened to the North Indian Diner," Silver said by way of greeting and apology. He held up the Pixel Fold. "You can't get these in Australia, so I think Google Maps is a bit... something?" He opened and closed the phone a few times, because that's what he'd always done to fix his tech.

A cloud of unease approached from the south-east. It was the Guerrilla Gamer, the fact of his surviving the pandemic no less remarkable than the fact he still went by "The Guerrilla Gamer" despite being a man of 48 and a director at the BCT. The pandemic had made strangers of us all. No wait that's not it, the pandemic had made us all stranger.

"You," he said, looking at my feet. "What are you wearing?"

I was saved the need to explain by the arrival of one-timem Nintendo magazine editor L-, whose anonymity I've been instructed to continue to maintain, because he's a famously controversial streamer now. You can probably guess which one.

I was able to avoid answering, as Cmos fell out of an Uber into the gutter, and stood up. He was shorter than we remembered. "You see now the downside of the vaccine?" he squawked. As usual he offered no further explanation.

Then we all exchanged pleasantries with the wary distrust of men who hadn't seen each other for a couple of years. Meatloaf - one time ex-editor of an ex-official PlayStation magazine - turned up at some point and pretended to have arrived earlier.

Eventually we struggled inside and had to immediately stop and wait in a tiny dark vestibule. Silver was still flexing his Pixel Fold. "It might be okay, apparently this place has an awesome gin garden, which is like a beer garden but for gin," he said.

"Oh I'm sorry," said a waitsthing, suddenly glitching out of what looked like a bricked-up doorway, "we don't seat people in the garden, since they built the new apartments."

We stared at the waitsthing blankly.

"YOU," HE SAID, LOOKING AT MY FEET. "WHAT ARE YOU WEARING?"

"Because the apartment building blocks out the sun," the waitsthing explained.

The Guerilla Gamer leaned forward. "Then we will drink in the shade."

There was another pause.

"Okay whatever, just wait." We stood in the corridor and just waited. The waitsthing went into the garden with a handful of cutlery to make a big deal of setting the table, during which one of the forks fell off the table and just span around and around on the floor.

"Dude, is this another one of your tortuous metaphors, about loading screens or something?" said Meatloaf. "Because I haven't missed them."

"WHERE are your GODDAMN BOOTS?!" screamed L-, who apparently couldn't take it anymore.

Rather than answer, I looked at all the weird linocuts of George Takei in a Sombrero. "This place is madness," I said. "I mean it's almost blasphemy."

"Nah," said Silver, "this is just Newtown."

L- grabbed me by the lapels. "Why. Aren't. You. Wearing. The Boots?" he demanded.

"Okay fine!" I squealed, shaking him off. "They died in a fire okay? Is that what you wanted me to say? They burned up! I wear Allbirds now because of the low carbon footprint! It's not so bad! At least it's better than what happened to my crazy ex-third flatmate!"

There was dead silence.

"Wh... why?" stammered Cmos. "What happened to Vic? Aw dude don't say it, what happened to Victor Ninox man, don't say..."

And that was the moment Vic finally arrived. With his kids.

WANT TO RELIVE THE GLORY DAYS?
The collected works of Yellow Boots are available now on Amazon Kindle. All the classic columns! None of the shit ones! Search "Kindle Yellow Boots Anthony Fordham", and smell the nostalgia.

EVANGELION PRODUCTION MODEL-02
EVA-02
EVANGELION
EVA 2
Code 777

RARE ITEMS TO DESIRE

ROG LAUNCHES STRICTLY LIMITED EDITION EVANGELION COLLABORATION

Asus' ROG has once again collaborated with Japanese Anime Studio, Studio Khara to produce a strictly limited-edition range of Evangelion-themed PC gaming kit. For those not up to speed with the Japanese mecha anime genre, Evangelion is a franchise that started in the 90s and features giant living humanoids fighting giant monsters in world riddled with religious allegories. It's arguably a precursor to the Hollywood-derived Pacific Rim franchise, but with more lore than explosions.

For those seething at such an horrendous oversimplification of the wonders of EVA, know that the new ROG range's designs are inspired by the EVA-02 and its pilot, Asuka plus their signature, red and orange colourway. This is the second collaborative collection to be created by ROG and it includes a motherboards, graphics card, cardholder, gaming case, an all-in-one cooler, plus peripherals and other paraphernalia. Here's what you need to know...

ROG HYPERION EVA-02 EDITION

ROG's popular Hyperion PC case typically took the form of an imposing, dark, monolithic machine. The EVA-02 Edition is dramatically more striking with its red, black and orange colour scheme (with green highlights) and will appeal to many buyers who don't even know the show. Outside these signature characteristics, it also features an EVA-02 custom side plate that further amplifies the strength of this collaboration.

All the same ROG features are there, including dual 420mm radiator support; four pre-connected 140mm fans; metal graphics card holders supporting both horizontal and vertical mount; tool-less design; Addressable RGB (ARGB) fan hub with Aura Sync support; dual-USB-C ports both supporting fast charging; an aluminium-reinforced frame; extra space for cable management; a storage

1000W
NERV
主電源供給システム
内部

Far Left: The detail and styling on the ROG Hyperion case is just amazing.
Left: Ever seen a motherboard look this cool? What a stunner!
Above: The ROG Strix GeForce RTX 4090 24GB GDDR6X OC EVA-02 Edition.

drawer for components; and high-quality building materials to ensure its longevity.

Whether or not you're a fan of the show, this limited-edition, Evangelion Hyperion makes a cracking centrepiece for any gaming PC.

ROG MAXIMUS Z790 HERO EVA-02 EDITION

One of the best gaming motherboards on the market also gets the EVA treatment. It too has been transformed from brooding black to EVA-02's signature red and orange, with additional design flourishes including an AT Field surrounding the CPU, a Polymo lighting display on the internal I/O cover (that switches between EVA-02 and its piolet Asuka), plus the hidden "The Beast" mode pattern on backplate.

The Z790-chipset motherboard wields a Socket LGA 1700 for Intel 12th and 13th-generation processors and it's surrounded by 20+1 90A power stages for top performance and stability. There are dual PCIe 5.0 slots for both expansion cards and M.2 drives, plus four DDR5 RAM slots supporting up to a massive 192GB of system memory. Whether it's used in conjunction with other ROG EVA components or not, this gaming PC motherboard offers both fearsome looks and performance.

ROG STRIX GEFORCE RTX 4090 24GB GDDR6X OC EVA-02 EDITION

A limited-edition ROG collaboration needs a special graphics card and they don't get more special than a special-edition overclocked ROG Nvidia RTX 4090 graphics card with 24GB of GDDR6X RAM, in limited-edition colour tone and style of Asuka, the piolet of EVA-02.

It offers some of the very best thermal performance on the market, thanks to three, special Asus Axial-tech fans that have been up-scaled to produce 23 per cent more airflow; a new patented vapour chamber with milled heat-spreader on the top of the massive 3.5 slot fin array optimised heatsink; a vented, diecast shroud, frame and backplate for better rigidity and cooling; plus digital power control featuring high-current power stages and 15K capacitors for overclockers who want to push their gaming even further.

ROG RYUJIN III 360 ARGB EVA-02 EDITION

Amazing PC performance matched with amazing looks demands top-tier CPU cooling and the EVA-02 Edition of the ROG Ryujin III 360 ARGB delivers. Once again, its red-and-orange, Asuka-inspired theme matches the partnering ROG components. The water block even wears the same A10 Nerve Clip interfacing headset as Asuka, bringing fans one extra step closer to its heroine. It includes multiple sets of licensed animated Evangelion GIFs within the enhanced 3.5-inch LCD display for monitoring and graphics; premium ROG ARGB magnetic daisy-chainable fans with gen2 LEDs for customisable lighting effects; and Armory Crate compatibility for comprehensive and intuitive control.

These all make this all-in-one liquid CPU cooler – with 8th-gen Asetek pump, embedded pump fan and 120mm fans – look great while they're expelling the heat away from your PC.

ROG THOR 1000W PLATINUM II EVA EDITION

With great power comes great power requirement and you'll need the best power supply to provide it. The 1000W ROG Thor has you covered and it too has been given a matching Evangelion makeover. The modular PSU still comes with a Lambda A++, plus 80 Plus Platinum certifications for noise and efficiency while Asus' Axial-tech fans and ROG heatsinks provide enhanced quality. It sports special organisation Nerv livery and will provide your PC with all the reliable power you need.

ROG HERCULX EVA-02 EDITION

Asus ROG engineers haven't just focused on power and cooling but partnering paraphernalia like the Herculx card support. It's highly adaptable and can support cards between 72-128mm, including Nvidia RTX 40-series models, and it does so toollessly and without taking up a card slot. There's even an integrated spirit level for ease of set-up and its Tokyo-3 GeoFront and Asuka styling will shine through your gaming case.

ROG has also provided a range of partnering EVA-02 peripherals and accessories that include the ROG Gladius III Wireless AimPoint EVA-02 Edition gaming mouse; ROG Harpe Ace Mouse Grip Tape; a ROG Strix Scope RX EVA-02 Edition gaming keyboard; EVA-02 keycap replacements for existing RX-switched keyboards and even a ROG Scabbard II EVA Edition gaming mousepad!

So, even if you don't want to build an entire Evangelion-inspired dream PC, you can spice up your existing gaming set-up while on a budget.

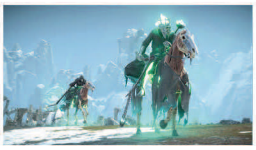
Just remember that all products are strictly limited and once they're gone... it will be goodbye to all these officially licensed Evangelion goods. Whether you're a fan of the show, or just love the unique designs, it is now or never, don't dally and secure yours while stocks last!

See the incredible ROG Evangelion gear at: https://rog.asus.com/microsite/ROGxEVANGELION

Far left: Now we're playing with power!
Left: All custom, and all beautiful to behold.
Right: There's even a GPU support device with full Evangelion theming!
Far right: The Evangelion theme extends to the mouse, which will look incredible next to the Evangelion keyboard.

EVA-02
UP
RCULX
電力充足

ROG X EVANGELION PROJECT
EVA02
CHANCE!



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
November 17	Frontier Developments	In-house	aosrealmsofruin.com

WARHAMMER AOS: REALMS OF RUIN

Understanding the spirit of Frontier's new RTS

In Shyish, the Realm of Death, Nagash the Great Necromancer moulds the souls of the deceased into his personal army. Cursed with new forms that reflect their mortal sins, he creates endless hosts of wailing, suffering spirits known as the Nighthaunt. And then he sends them all to capture my bloody control points.

When this real-time strategy game set in the mythic fantasy world of Warhammer Age of Sigmar was announced, only two of the game's four factions were revealed: the shining warriors of the Stormcast Eternals, and the vicious, swamp-dwelling Orruk Kruleboyz. As I play through two of the game's campaign missions, I get to meet a third – and it's not a friendly introduction. As I attempt to hold three objectives – the bases of spectral chains I need to break to retrieve a powerful artefact – the Nighthaunt throw themselves at my heroic Stormcast in relentless waves.

This seems to be what, at its core, *Realms of Ruin* is all about: objective control. Though the two campaign missions I play are quite different conceptually – one, pushing into Orruk-controlled territory, the other holding out against the aforementioned barrage of ghosts – they both essentially come down to seizing and holding ground against repeated enemy attacks. With little in the way of base-building or economy management, beyond being able to plop one of a limited set of structures on points you control, the focus isn't on how you make your armies, it's on how you use them to dominate.

THE FOCUS ISN'T ON HOW YOU MAKE YOUR ARMIES, IT'S ON HOW YOU USE THEM

The result, at least in these campaign missions, is a feeling of constantly putting out fires. You can only have so many troops on the field at any given time, and to divide them across every point is to spread them too thin. But any point left undefended is vulnerable – if you don't have some backup standing ready to swoop over to it, it'll soon be lost. There's a constant ebb and flow of battle – your goal is to make sure it surges in your favour more often than against you.

The result is a lot of real tension in these missions. The enemy keeps you under pressure – you can never just rest on your laurels or turtle up against invasion. But where in most RTS games, that would make it a gruelling test of your speed and micromanagement skills, *Realms of Ruin*'s slower pace puts the focus on your tactical choices above all. It can take quite a long time for a unit to get from one end of the map to another, or between two vital points. That goes double for the hulking, heavily-armoured Stormcast. That means you have plenty of time to choose who's going where when the alarm goes up that a point is under threat – but it also means you'd better have made the right choice, because if you haven't, pivoting isn't going to be quick or easy.

PLAYED IT

GHOST OF A CHANCE

I'll be the first to admit I'm no expert when it comes to RTS games. I've been playing them since *Warcraft II*, but I've never been any good at them – a fact made abundantly clear when the game's PR has to jump in mid-mission to offer some desperate tips for my stalemate against the undead. But despite my blunders, it's clear that *Realms of Ruin* is much more accessible than you'd usually expect from the genre. With a modest number of units to control, and the time to really consider where they were needed at any given moment, I never felt like the hole in my strategy was just not being able to click fast enough or not knowing the exact right order of commands to execute.

That suits the feel of Warhammer Age of Sigmar – both the very deliberate play of the tabletop game, but also the tone of

the setting. Where the more widely known Warhammer Fantasy and Warhammer 40,000 setting emphasise grim futility, in Age of Sigmar, the light of hope burns in the darkness. The actions of small groups of heroes – or horrors – can change the course of history, and it certainly feels that way in *Realms of Ruin* when a handful of troops, deployed decisively at the perfect moment, hold the line just long enough to win you the game.

Authenticity is a key aim for *Realms of Ruin*. Though Age of Sigmar may not be familiar to you as a PC player – it's one of Warhammer creator Games Workshop's newest settings, launched after the official demise of Warhammer Fantasy – Frontier Developments has clearly gone to great pains to be as faithful to the setting as possible. The chunky little units look like they walked straight off a wargamer's shelf, the battlefields look like art from an army book, and I even spotted trees that evoke specific Warhammer terrain sets.

My hands-on gives me some more time with another key part of that equation: the story. Leading into my two missions are cutscenes following the Stormcast Eternals and a wizard ally as they search for an artefact of power in the swamps of the Realm of Beasts. As the characters exposit and banter, the dialogue is earnest and a little cheesy – and honestly, that feels like the right approach. Such a big, wild setting doesn't need to be undercut with a quip or a knowing remark, and melodrama fits the fantasy better than fine nuance would.

As soon as the wizard starts sinisterly talking about harnessing power and delving into arcane ruins, you might as well stamp 'I'm going to turn evil later' on his forehead, but though the characters aren't subtle, they are likeable – particularly the Stormcast leaders, who, though they make look like fantasy Space Marines, have far more personality. The company's banner bearer is a particular highlight, sounding like a mystical Jason Statham as he points out that exploring the spooky ancient ruins might not be the best idea. Simple leads also allow plenty of space for efficient exposition, getting newcomers up to speed on the Mortal Realms in a way that will still feel true to the source material for die-hard Age of Sigmar fans.

FRONTIER HAS CLEARLY GONE TO GREAT PAINS TO BE AS FAITHFUL TO THE SETTING

HAMMER TIME

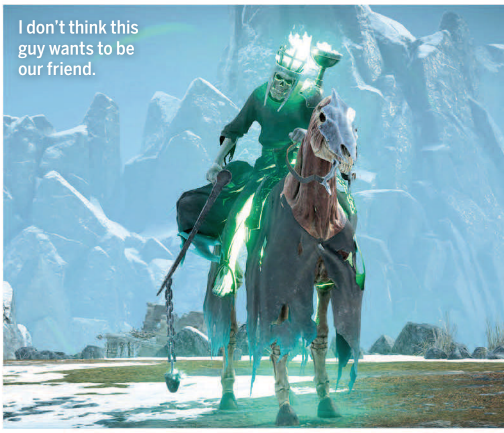
That authenticity certainly extends to the Nighthaunt, too. Though I don't get to play them myself, my battle against them reveals that they're a versatile and surprisingly resilient horde, much like in the tabletop game. Far from just a crowd of generic ghosts, they're misshapen, hunched monstrosities, each distorted into a form pleasing to Nagash. From the Craventhrone Guard dragging around crossbows far too large for their wispy arms, to the huge and disgusting Mourngul that propels its legless torso around with just its gangly arms, to Awlrach the Drowner, a sinister boatman rowing his ethereal vessel across the battlefield, they're all completely charming in their horribleness – and each fill their own clear role in the faction's strategy.

As they assault my control points, I'm forced to constantly adapt. Clanking Chainrasps come at me in crowds, bogging down my more elite units – at first they're constantly slowing me down, until I'm tipped off that the Prosecutor's hammer-flinging area-of-effect attack is the perfect way to clear them out. Grimghast Reapers come in smaller numbers, but when they hit my line their scythe-swings wreak havoc – peppering them with crossbow fire from my Vanguard Raptors seems to be the best way to soften them up before the charge.

Counter-play in *Realms of Ruin* is kept pretty simple – there's an easy rock-paper-scissors mechanic that makes each of the three broad infantry types good against one type but weak against another, and it's relatively straightforward to get a sense of what each active ability is useful for (even if I needed some hints). Putting it into practice is the tricky part, especially when splitting your forces across your territory makes it difficult to have the right units in the right place.

Realms of Ruin feels like more than just a throwback to the RTS golden age. Long-time genre fans will certainly feel some nostalgia – especially those who enjoyed the *Dawn of War* games. But there's a modern vision here too, one particularly aimed at making the push and pull of war the star of the show, and making that something even newcomers to the genre can enjoy.

Robin Valentine



I don't think this guy wants to be our friend.

ABOVE: Just popping out to get the latest issue of PCPP.

LEFT: Holding back the Nighthaunt.

STALKER 2: Heart of Chornobyl

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBA	GSC Game World	In-house	shorturl.at/iqFT8

STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

Life's tough in the zone

The demo starts, and my health is already draining. Welcome to *STALKER 2*, I guess. This Gamescom, for the first time, GSC Game World's long awaited sequel is available to play – albeit just the smallest possible slice. But while the demo may be only 15 minutes long, it manages to pack in all the grim, dystopian misery a *STALKER* fan could want.

PLAYED IT

Case in point, my health. I'm unconscious in an irradiated field full of anomalies. But that isn't what's killing me off. No, my character finally opens his eyes, and I discover the culprit: a mutant dog that's been snacking on his leg. My character pulls out a gun. It jams. The dog lunges at his neck. My character struggles to hold it at bay, weakly kicking it away just far enough for it to land in a gravity anomaly.

Finally able to stand, I look around to find a stranger who's been silently watching this all unfold. He chucks me a bolt. Right, yes. The field is full of anomalies. Bolts are a *STALKER* classic – an invaluable tool for pinpointing any anomalies in your immediate area. If I throw a bolt at a gravity anomaly, it'll be briefly weakened, letting me pass.

Radiation is a factor too, which I discover as I dash past the anomaly and towards a nearby lake. My Geiger counter clicks into overdrive, and static starts to cover the screen. Not that way then. I double back and instead head over to the stranger, who advises I deliver a couple of medkits to some locals in exchange for a safe place to go. And with that, I'm left to my own devices.

> **RADIATION IS A FACTOR TOO, WHICH I DISCOVER AS I DASH PAST THE ANOMALY**

I get the sense this Gamescom build is taking it easy on me. I check my inventory and I'm well stocked with weapons and healing items. A couple of syringes later, and I'm basically good as new. Still, I'm not feeling particularly welcomed by the Zone, which is why I'm not surprised when, as I crest a nearby hill, I encounter a man who immediately opens fire.

I shoot back, taking him down with relative ease. That's when a pop-up in the corner informs me that I've failed a quest to meet some locals near a post office. He wasn't shooting at me. He was shooting at the dogs that are now charging at me.

TAKING THE CHAIR

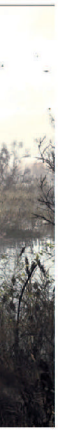
Investigating a building, I anger some bandits who think I'm trying to reclaim their territory back for the STALKERs. This is a tougher fight – these guys are definitely shooting at me. I may have guns, but I'm short on ammo. The guns I'm using aren't exactly good – they kick like hell, making it hard to land bullets with militaristic precision. I'm having to use cover wisely, dodge out at opportunistic moments to scavenge ammo from a body, before diving back to safety. My healing items are depleting rapidly. Eventually, though, the last guy falls, and I find a nice stash of ammo and weapons for my trouble.

Near death experience number five arrives at the end of the demo, when the sky turns red and a broadcasting system warns of an incoming emission – a kind of deadly lightning storm. Luckily I'm near the safehouse, and thus the end of the demo, but rather than rush straight there, I stop to appreciate the effect of the sky turning apocalyptic. Elsewhere, *STALKER 2* looked good, sure, but utilitarian. It's the post-apocalypse. The buildings are concrete and rubble. The vibes are grey and dour. But here, amid the alien red glow of an emission, it feels like it's making the most of Unreal Engine 5.

Finally, regretfully, I head to the safehouse. I knock on the door, and start to collapse. The door opens and someone wearing a gas mask appears. I can feel their weary disdain as they drag me inside. Life's tough in the zone.

Phil Savage

Unreal Engine 5 is being used for the game's graphics.



ABOVE: This guy didn't get his copy of PC PowerPlay magazine.

LEFT: Environments are expansive, but beware radiation.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2024 in Early Access	Blackbird Interactive	Team17	earthlessgame.com

EARTHLESS

Roguelike deckbuilder journeys into space

PLAYED IT

I'm the first journalist in the world who's laid hands on the new sci-fi strategy game from the studio behind *Hardspace: Shipbreaker* and *Homeworld: Deserts of Kharak*, and I've just broken it to pieces in front of them. I'm having a great time.

Every time I preview a game that has unfinished art and narrative dead-ends scattered around like landmines, there's the potential for an awkward moment where the game flat-out breaks. The developers take control to sidestep a bug or reboot after a crash; they apologise, keep it light with some smalltalk.

Earthless, though, which is a hybrid of a roguelike deckbuilder and a grid-based strategy game, hasn't bugged out or airlocked itself straight to desktop. I've just stumbled onto a card combination that the developers clearly didn't expect, steamrolling my way to the end of a climactic boss fight before an enemy ship managed to even scratch the paint on my hull. "You should take notes, Rob," jokes *Earthless* director Hoi-Fung Ma. Apparently art director Rob Aduna had never tried what I would soon dub the Shield Meta.

THE RIGHT DRAW

Like every great deckbuilder and pretty much every roguelike, *Earthless* is at least somewhat built to be broken. Chasing the high of a magical card combo is what makes these games so replayable, and that basic pull is already here.

> **THE SHIELD CARDS I HAD IN MY STARTING DECK WERE KEEPING ME SAFE**

Early in my run I found a card that let me overcharge my ship's shields so that they would stay up between rounds rather than resetting to zero. Then I found an artefact that granted me five bonus shields, which I affixed to the one card in my deck that cost no energy to play. Last, the pièce de résistance: an attack card that let me detonate my overcharged shields, dealing big damage to any adjacent enemy. Suddenly the shield cards I had in my starting deck were both keeping me safe and letting me pulverise the enemy to dust.

It was a satisfying first go at *Earthless*, if I ignored how much was clearly still heavily work-in-progress. The tactical grid where I position my ship is full of vaguely turd-like asteroids and alien vessels that float like lifeless lumps, animations yet to be implemented. Card art and icons need more work to clarify status effects and synergies. And this is only half of what *Earthless* hopes to be – the other half is a light narrative sim where your decisions, as captain, affect your crew and their happiness, which in turn helps or hinders you in battle. That part of the game is early and not yet deeply 'hooked in' to the card combat. But it's where *Earthless*' real potential lies.

"Right now it's the skeleton of it," says Ma. "There are a lot of interesting interactions we can already have between the moment-to-moment gameplay and the metagame systems around crew morale. But what's really important for *Earthless*, and BBI games in general, is making sure there's a sci-fi context around it, and I think that's going to be the thing that will grab people that don't tend to play these types of games."

TAKING THE CHAIR

Earthless' cards, for example, aren't meant to be abstract – they're command chips you're slotting into a terminal to direct your ship. "It's all part of that captain fantasy: immerse them into the chair and they're giving orders to their crew," says chief strategy officer Trey Smith, who's been helping Ma, a first time game director, mould what started as a prototype more than two years ago.

Aduna chimes in with some practical examples of how *Earthless* will evolve. "When you discard, the cards just kind of

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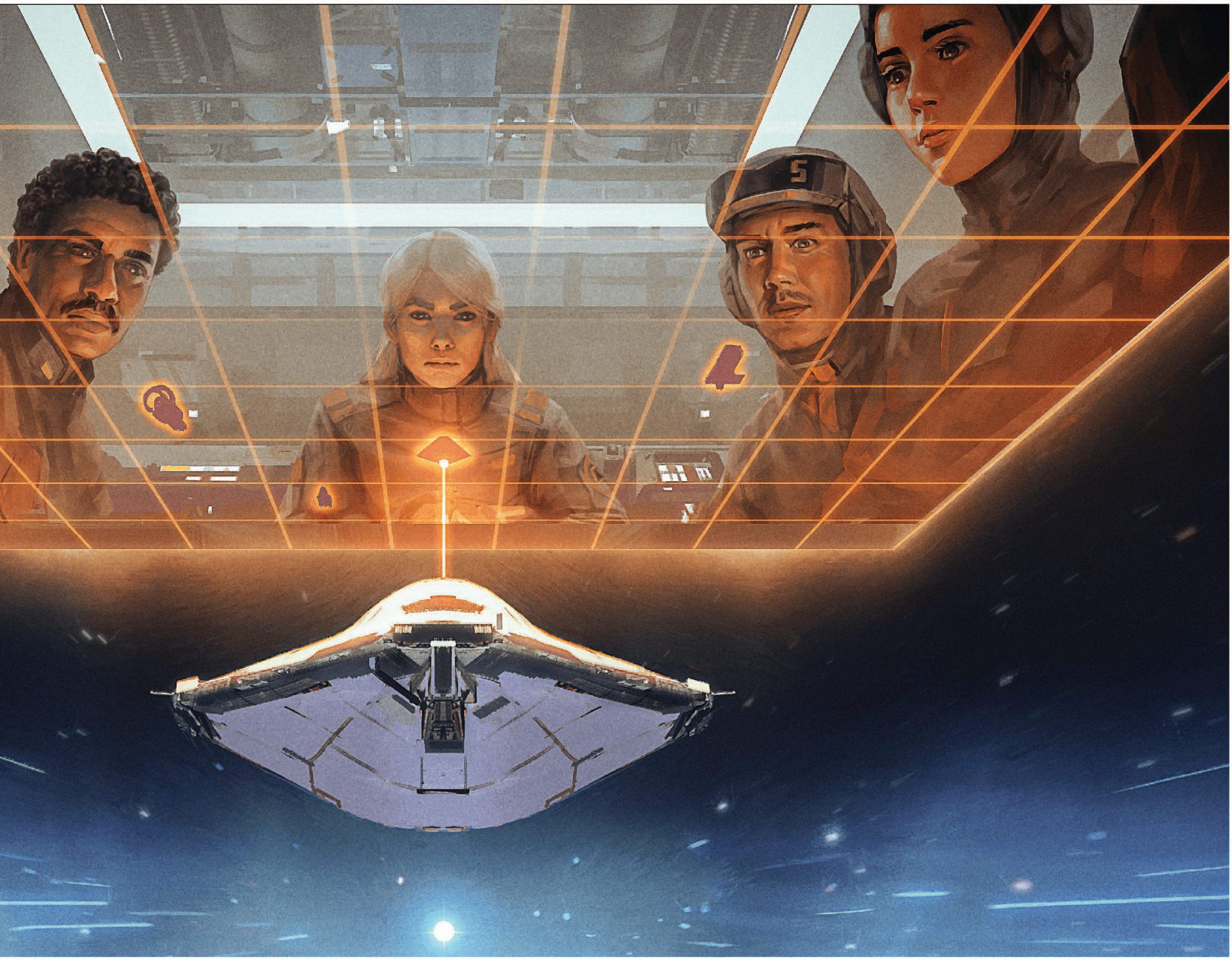
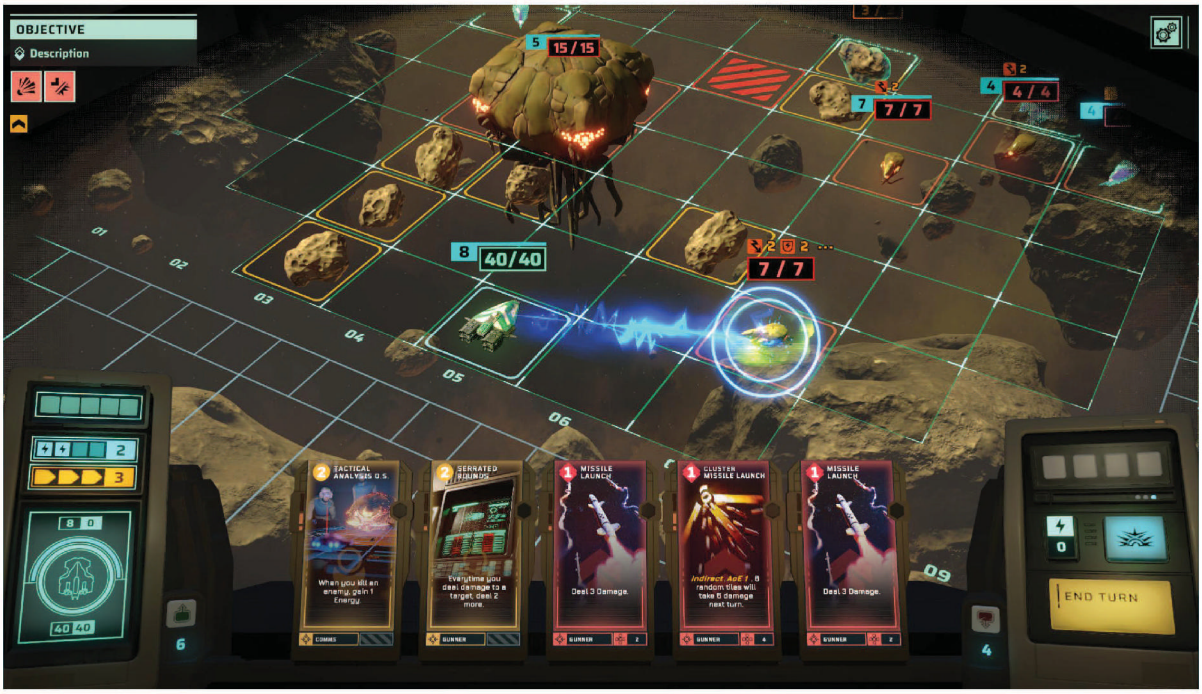



OBJECTIVE
Description
5 15 / 15
7 7 / 7
4 4 / 4
8 40/40
7 / 7
01
02
03
04
05
06
09
2
3
8 0
40 40
6
2 TACTICAL ANALYSIS O.S.
COMMS
2 SERRATED ROUNDS
GUNNER
1 MISSILE LAUNCH
GUNNER 2
1 CLUSTER MISSILE LAUNCH
GUNNER 4
1 MISSILE LAUNCH
GUNNER 2
4
0
END TURN

When you kill an enemy, gain 1 Energy.

Everytime you deal damage to a target, deal 2 more.

Deal 3 Damage.

Indirect, AoE 1 . 8 random tiles will take 8 damage next turn.

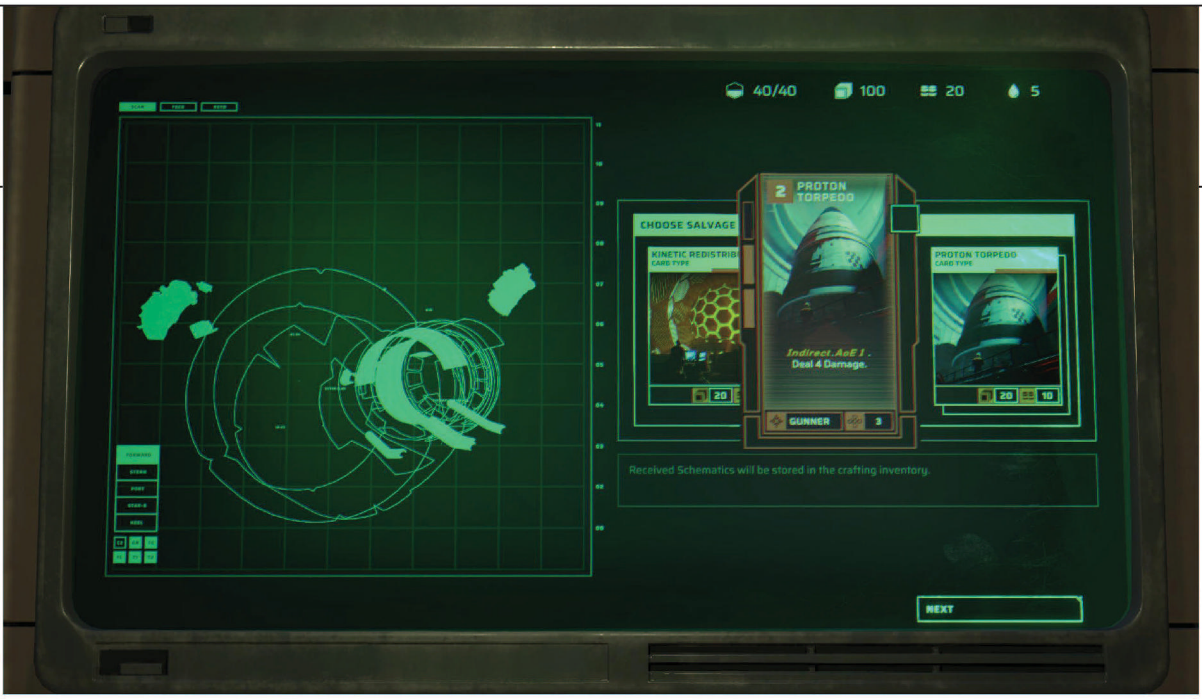
Deal 3 Damage.

ABOVE: *Earthless*' cinematic art aims for a mix of inspiration and hard sci-fi.

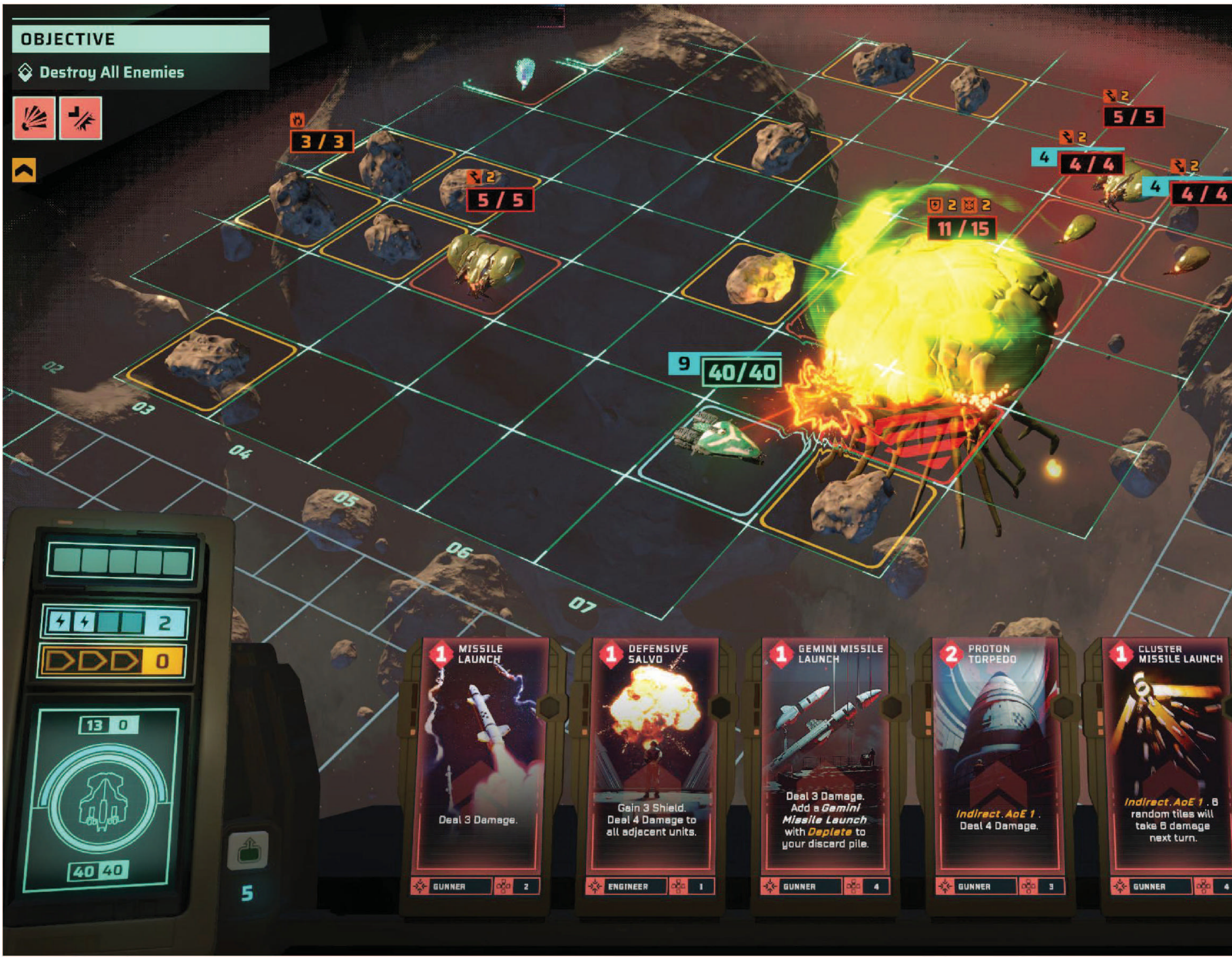
LEFT: Yellow equipment cards can augment your attacks or add new effects.

RIGHT: I want to see more of this retro sci-fi flavour make its way into the battle screen.

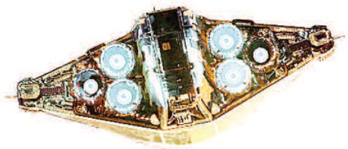
BELOW: Highlighting any enemy will show you what they're going to do on their turn, but enemies are adaptive. Even if you move, they may compensate to hit you.

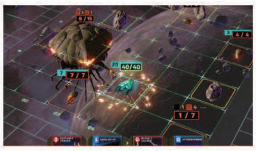

40/40
100
20
5
CHOOSE SALVAGE
KINETIC REDISTRIB
2 PROTON TORPEDO
Indirect. AoE 1. Deal 4 Damage.
GUNNER
3
PROTON TORPEDO
20
10
NEXT

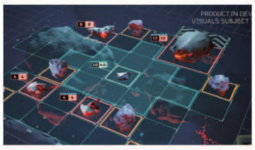
Received Schematics will be stored in the crafting inventory.

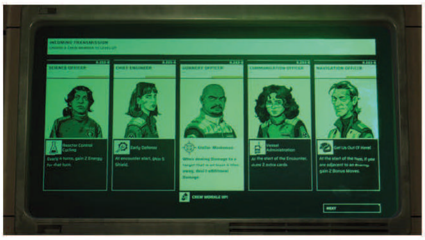

OBJECTIVE
Destroy All Enemies
3 / 3
5 / 5
11 / 15
4 / 4
40/40
9
2
0
13 0
40 40
5
1 MISSILE LAUNCH
Deal 3 Damage.
GUNNER 2
1 DEFENSIVE SALVO
Gain 3 Shield. Deal 4 Damage to all adjacent units.
ENGINEER 1
1 GEMINI MISSILE LAUNCH
Deal 3 Damage. Add a Gemini Missile Launch with Deplete to your discard pile.
GUNNER 4
2 PROTON TORPEDO
Indirect. AoE 1. Deal 4 Damage.
GUNNER 3
1 CLUSTER MISSILE LAUNCH
Indirect. AoE 1. 8 random tiles will take 8 damage next turn.
GUNNER

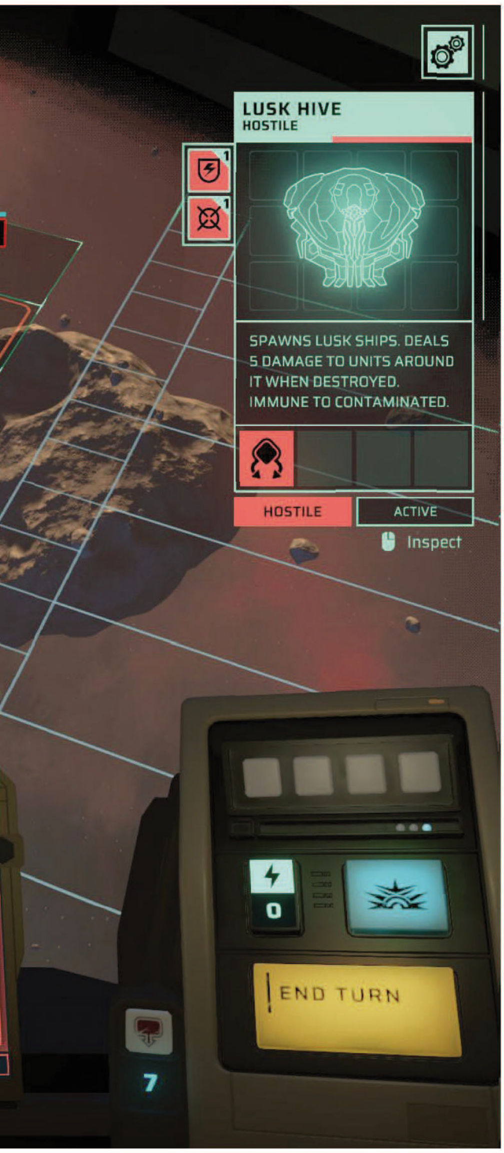
Yeah, don't expect to be seeing a whole lot of ol' Earth...











SPAWNS LUSK SHIPS. DEALS 5 DAMAGE TO UNITS AROUND IT WHEN DESTROYED. IMMUNE TO CONTAMINATED.

float up on the screen to nowhere, right? Those are the kinds of things we want to solve for. Maybe it's a physical tray that comes up... we're going towards a Ron Cobb, very retro-futuristic vibe that has a grounded nature to it, and we feel that starting to solidify."

Right now *Earthless* follows a structure familiar from *Slay the Spire* or *FTL*, where you progress across a galaxy map peppered with nodes that represent battles or little narrative moments. At the end of each map there's a boss like the one I shield-stomped; cross three star maps and you'll complete a run. The narrative nodes can reward you with resources or artefacts, but also complicate relationships with your crew based on their personality traits. I ran into one event where I had to choose how careful to be with the cryotubes of some of my ship's passengers, with the more cautious choice netting me resources but displeasing one of my officers.

"Eventually we want it to be a lot more complex in terms of chaining events, so that your reactions to certain events will have consequences later in the level," says Ma. The moral choice could pay off now but backfire later, for example, with a crisis in engineering because we diverted too much power to protect passengers.

At this stage in *Earthless*, your crew's opinions don't have much bearing on the rest of the game, but the plan is for them to chime in during battle, and maybe even add cards to your deck. "If the pilot agrees with your choices, maybe you get an extra move per turn," says Smith. "But if they're pissed off, all of a sudden you've got one less move per turn... so you've got to make a choice like, 'Do I side with this crew member who I think is an asshole just to make this extra move?'"

ZEROING IN

Blackbird is unusually forthcoming about just how many mistakes it takes to get a game right. Big pieces of *Earthless* have only recently been nailed down despite more than two years of iteration. Ma built his first prototype with physical cards and initially envisioned controlling a small fleet. But he found that tactics game players wanted to control all their units on the board while ignoring the cards, while Magic: The Gathering players would lay down their units and then wait for things to happen rather than controlling them.

Switching to one ship helped connect those two pieces but also had its own creative dead ends. "We had the idea that we needed variety, so we needed to make a modular ship system," says Aduna. "But at the end of the day, we're playing the game and it's like... you know, it's not really doing anything. So let's make bespoke ships that have a lot of personality."

Designing engaging variety rather than procedurally generated sameyness is the eternal challenge for roguelikes, and here again they learned the hard way. The first levels Ma designed had scripted events like an ambush when you reached a point on the map. "It was great for the first time, but it sucked for repetition," he says. "You already know the surprise! The philosophy changed after that, where these needed to be more like arenas. The units can change, the mutators can change, and that gives it the ability to repeat without being boring."

Even the 'captain fantasy' element only clicked into place six months ago, when someone said, "You can't be a captain unless you have a crew". It may be obvious, but it changed their perspective on the crew's personalities. "If you're a captain and you don't care about your crew, that's almost like not having a crew to begin with," Smith says. "So what are some things we can do to make you care about them? That was a big one, that decision to start playing up the crew and the roleplaying side of being a captain."

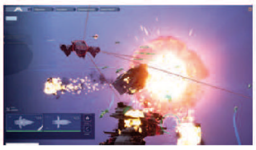
THIS IS THE RUN

Earthless' premise is that, with the destruction of our home world, humanity has sent thousands of seedships out to galaxies unknown in search of a new beginning. Each run you play will put you in command of one of those ships: a different captain, a different crew. It's a tidy bit of sci-fi theming for a roguelike, but also struck me as a fitting metaphor for the iterative process *Earthless* is still going through, on its way to an Early Access launch where it will change even more.

The version of the game I played didn't yet have what it takes to establish a new colony in a corner of space as competitive as the deckbuilding quadrant. But the right ideas are all there; *Earthless*' team seems to have worked out the star chart it needs to put the ship on the correct course. All that's left is to see it through.

Wes Fenlon

EVEN THE 'CAPTAIN FANTASY' ELEMENT ONLY CLICKED INTO PLACE SIX MONTHS AGO



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
February 2024	Blackbird Interactive	Gearbox Publishing	homeworlduniverse.com

HOMEWORLD 3

The space RTS aims to please with its War Games mode

With *Homeworld 3*, Relic's classic space RTS looks set to join the pantheon of returning PC gaming gods. Blackbird Interactive (the new studio, helmed by many of the original *Homeworld* devs) invited me to test-drive War Games mode, one of its big new features: a roguelike-inspired PvE mode for strategists in a hurry.

PLAYED IT

While no slouch as serious competitive games, the *Homeworld* series was always carried by its grandiose vibes, surprisingly powerful storytelling and spectacular, messy space battles. If that sounds even slightly intriguing, I recommend picking up the recent *Remastered* bundle of *Homeworld 1* & *2*, plus the GOG release of *Homeworld: Emergence*, the excellent but un-remastered middle game in the series.

These are classic games, and a hard act to follow. And while I can't speak to the quality of the writing and campaign design in *Homeworld 3* (the demo only included a short tutorial and a slice of the content from the new War Games multiplayer mode), I'm very happy to say that this is unquestionably *Homeworld*. The ships look immediately familiar, but are sharply textured and the hulls smooth and rounded when zoomed in on. The sound effects are punchy and sometimes overwhelming, just as I recall.

GAMES OF WAR

While the meat and potatoes of any *Homeworld* is the story campaign, *Homeworld 3* is adding a new, third option to the mix: War Games. A PvE mode playable solo or in three-player co-op, it puts a light rogue-lite spin on the traditional co-operative 'comp stomp' format, and plays out quickly enough for a session to be done in under an hour, culminating in a 'boss' encounter against a heavy capital ship. After a few sessions, I can definitely see the appeal.

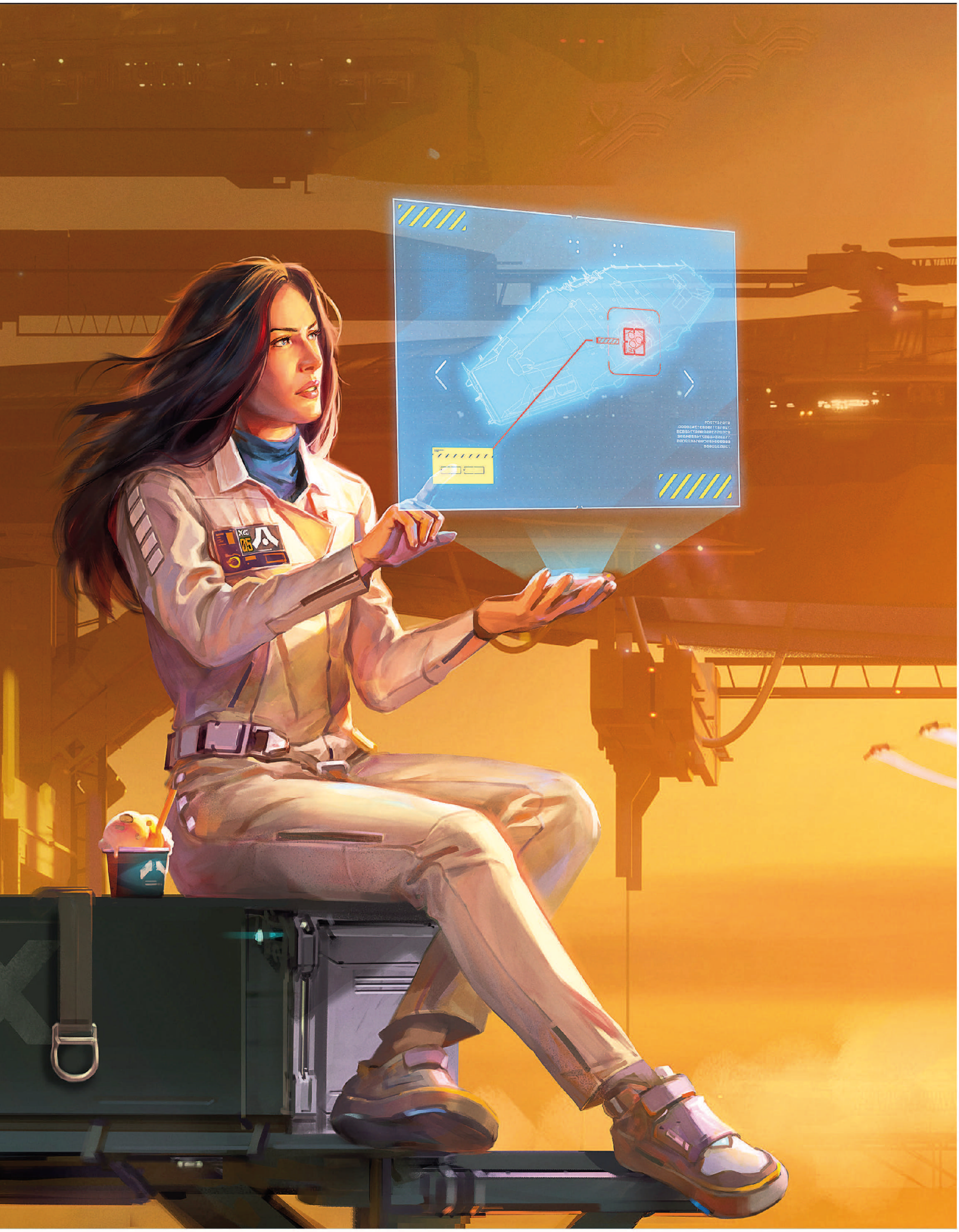
A War Games run has players picking from one of several starting fleets, and then completing a trio of small missions, each on their own map. Each map has a limited pool of resources to harvest, a random set of objectives to complete and artefacts to collect, plus continually escalating enemy spawns that will eventually overwhelm players unless they hustle. As such, it's a bit of a scramble (each map taking only 10-15 minutes) to grab the loot you can, build what forces you want and complete objectives as efficiently as possible, then hyperspace-jump into the next encounter.

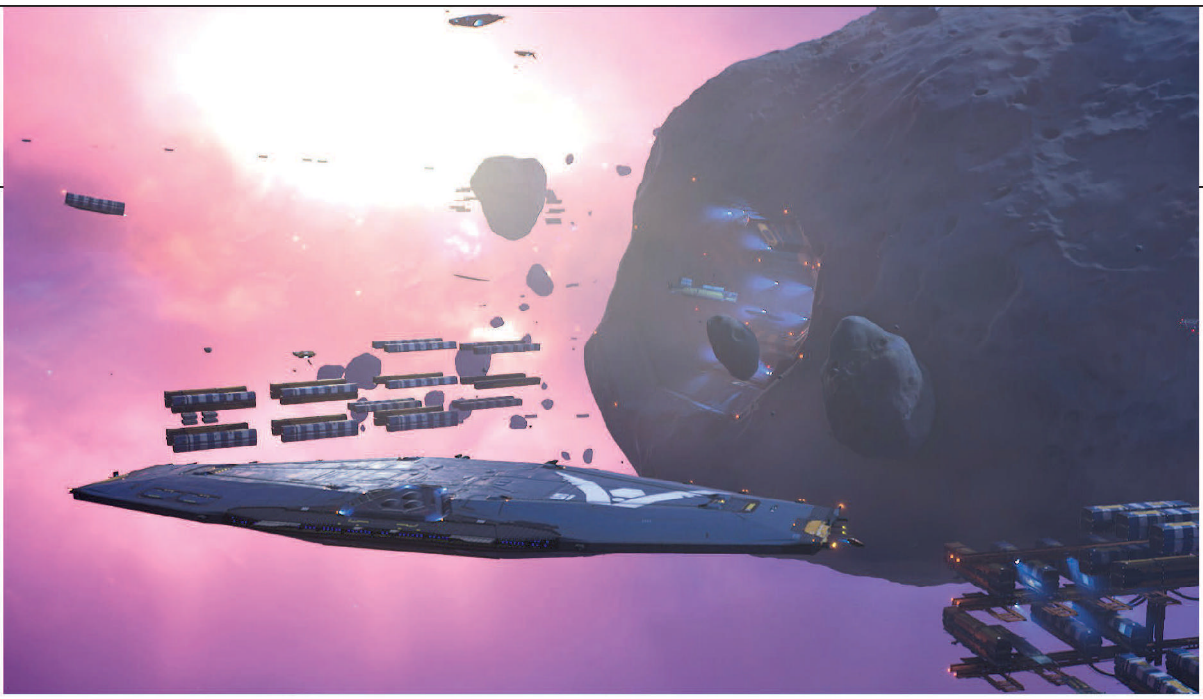
While the missions aren't especially deep what I found added the most variety to a War Games run was artefacts, the strongest nod towards modern roguelike design. Each one collected gives you a randomised list of three perks to pick from. Some unlock a new unit type, others giving a bonus to a class of units, or increasing the limit of units you can command of a particular type. They're quite significant upgrades as well, defining the strategies and unit compositions I'd use each run. In co-op, each artefact collected gives each player their own pick of three options.

While just a small slice of the final product, my impression from playing War Games mode is that Blackbird have taken an 'if it's not broke, don't fix it' approach with *Homeworld 3*. Which seems wise, given how well the original games hold up, especially in their semi-recent *Remastered* incarnations. There have been a few tweaks and changes made here, but the fundamentals are familiar and accessible to a returning fan. But after 20 years, there's been a few changes made under the hood as well.

Among the unavoidable changes, the two most significant differences are how the game is calculating damage. While the classic *Homeworld* games had a layer of

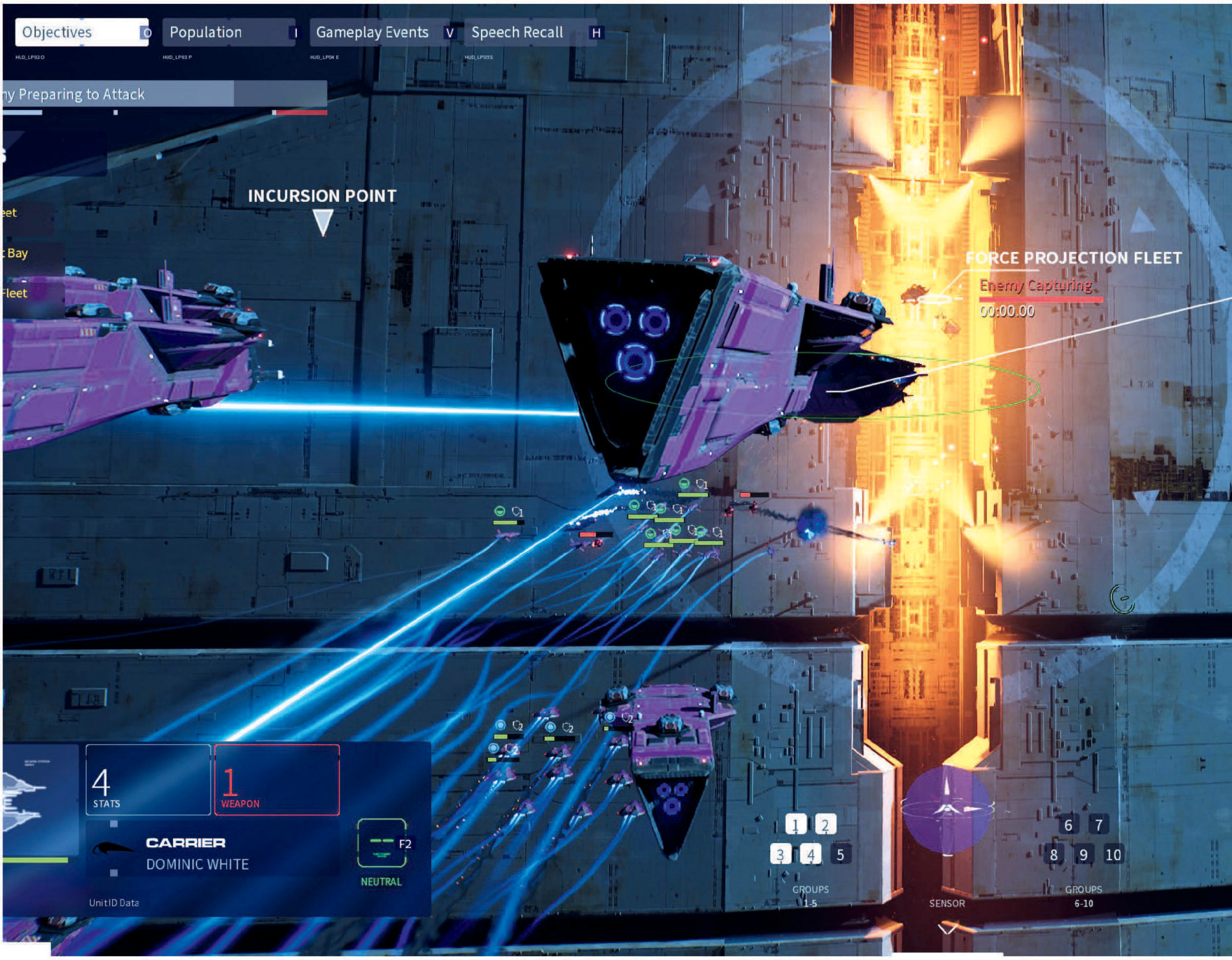
THE SOUND EFFECTS ARE PUNCHY AND SOMETIMES OVERWHELMING





RIGHT: The new and improved Mothership design, but something seems off.

BELOW: Capture and hold these megalithic shipyards, or face endless enemies.


Objectives O
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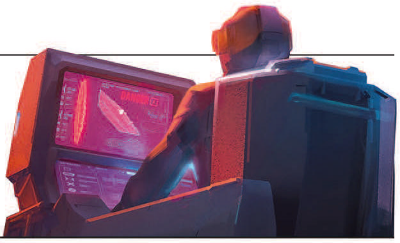
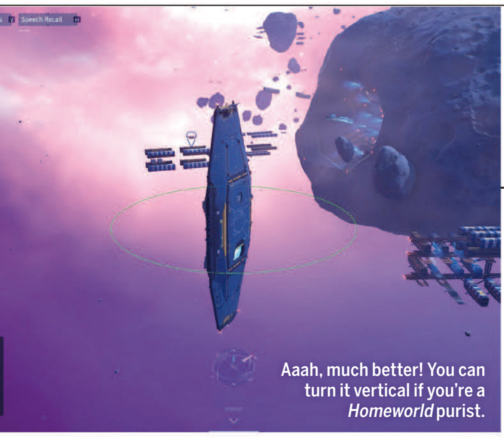
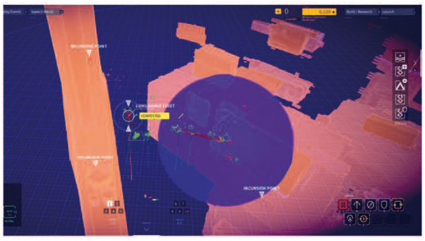
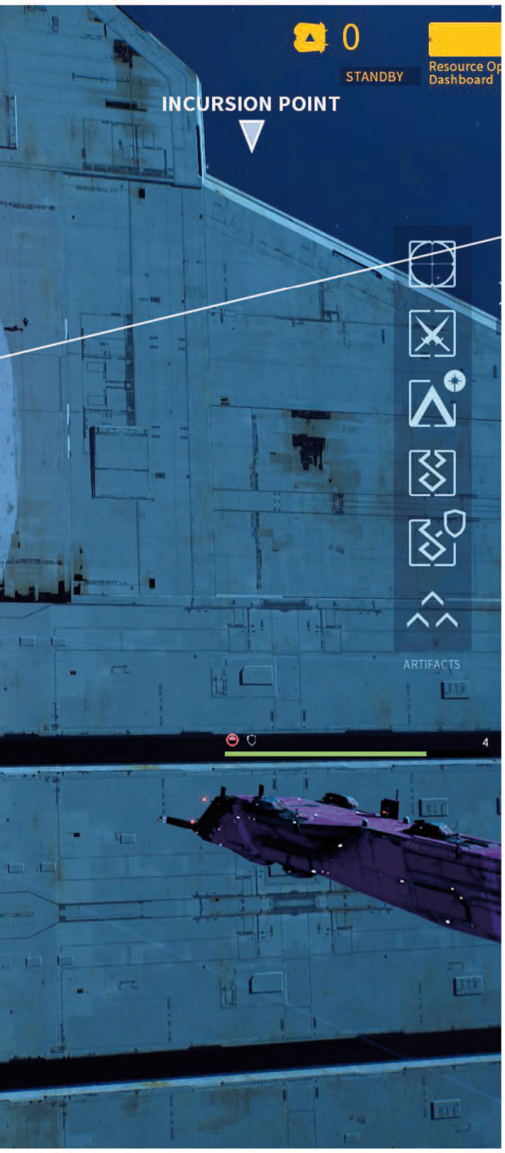
SENSOR
6 7 8 9 10
GROUPS 6-10





Aaah, much better! You can turn it vertical if you're a *Homeworld* purist.





abstracted damage rolls behind their spectacular space dogfights, *Homeworld 3* goes the *Total Annihilation* route and tracks every projectile as a physical object, with whatever it hits taking damage on impact. It changes the dynamic of fights a little, with fighters in an evasive formation able to juke around oncoming shells, while homing missiles have an advantage. Plus, it just looks nice once you zoom the camera up close.

The other notable change is in the battlefields. *Homeworld* has historically featured spectacular starscape backdrops worthy of the best pulp sci-fi novels, often with titanic superstructures visible off in the distance, but the actual battlefields were mostly empty. While allowing for free manoeuvre, the only thing differentiating one map from another was the placement of its resource fields, the occasional gas cloud, and player start positions. *Homeworld 3* is bringing all those big backdrop elements into the foreground, and asking you to factor them into your strategies.

Homeworld 3 now officially has terrain to navigate, and I got to poke around several densely decorated maps playing the War Games demo, which had me fighting in and around the floating wrecks of impossibly huge spacecraft and stations. While many engagements played out as per *Homeworld* standard, objectives tended to be placed in interesting nooks and crannies, forcing different approaches. A target at the bottom of a deep 'valley' in the map is no problem for a wave of fighters to get to, but larger ships need to slowly lower themselves downwards, and might have trouble shooting at targets below unless their weapons are belly-mounted.

These tunnels and gaps also make long-ranged weaponry like railguns and torpedoes more situational in their usage. Sniping at the edge of radar range is all well and good when you've got a clean line of sight, but if there's a town-sized slab of metal in the way, you'll have to take a very long way around to get a nice sniper shot. While it didn't fundamentally change the experience for me (at least so far), it did add a new strategic wrinkle to a familiar formula, and I'm curious to see how Blackbird expands on it in the campaign and PvP maps.

MY EXPERIENCE OF WAR GAMES FELT LIKE MORE OF A CASUAL COMP-STOMP

DIFFICULTY LEVEL

If there's one concern that I've got about *Homeworld 3* after playing the War Games mode, it's that it might not be difficult enough in this early state. I am historically bad at RTS games, despite enjoying them. *Company Of Heroes* often has me floundering to keep track of what's going on, and put me into a competitive *Starcraft* match and I will probably cry. And yet even thoroughly half-assing things, I've breezed through most of my attempts at War Games so far.

Armed with just a few fundamental rules of the genre (always attack-move, never sit on resources I could be spending on more units, and keep my forces together in a big blob so I don't have to micromanage things), my experience of War Games felt like more of a casual comp-stomp than a roguelike challenge. Enemy spawns tend to be small enough to clean up quickly before they get out of hand, and while encounters in co-op scale to the number of players, the game has yet to make me sweat in the way that past *Homeworld* games did.

While it makes for a gratifying and replayable demo experience, I do hope that the full version of this mode lets me crank up the heat a little, perhaps offering some difficulty settings. But despite the mild challenge, this feels unquestionably like *Homeworld*. It looks like *Homeworld*, it sounds like *Homeworld*. Old muscle memory reactivated almost immediately, and long-dormant neurons reignited. Even in this bite-sized format, it's a moreish strategy snack, and I cannot wait to get my teeth into the main course that is the story campaign.

One final detail revealed during the preview event was that *Homeworld 3* is going to have a full suite of mod tools at (or near) launch, plus integrated cross-store mod support courtesy of Mod.io. This means that mod releases won't be reliant on Valve's increasingly creaky Steam Workshop framework, and can be browsed and downloaded in-game no matter where you bought it from. Given *Homeworld*'s long history of mods, I can see this greatly extending the game's life, even if War Games mode doesn't catch on as Blackbird are hoping.

Homeworld 3 launches early next year, with Blackbird and Gearbox currently targeting a February 2024 release.

Dominic Tarason

PC PowerPlay

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

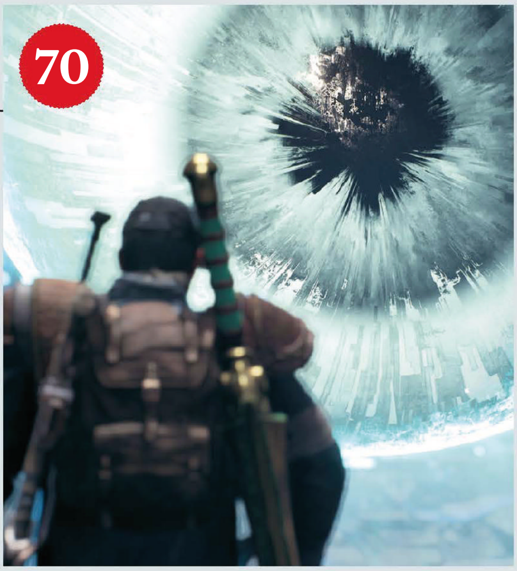
PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC PowerPlay staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Bhaal's spawn

Two months ago we boldly stated that *Baldur's Gate III* was going to be the "fantasy RPG of the decade" and that "RPGs are about to be changed forever". And, as our full *Baldur's Gate III* review shows this issue, those statements were far from hyperbole. This is a monumental release in the history of PC gaming and, trust me when I say this, an experience that every PC gamer should not miss.

Ditto for Starfield. The eternity of waiting is over, and while it's a mixed bag of amazing gaming with some irksome irritations, we're quite confident that if the devs don't fix the broken things, the modders will – and probably quicker. It's classic Bethesda RPG gaming, with the usual astonishing scope, deep storylines and quests, and all in a most beautifully created sci-fi world. So much gaming, it truly is a golden time.



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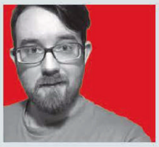
This month's Sushi-eating reviewers...



FRASER BROWN
Specialist in
Losing his life
Currently playing
Baldur's Gate III, Starfield
This month
Went mad trying to review *BG III*. Started talking to a hamster.

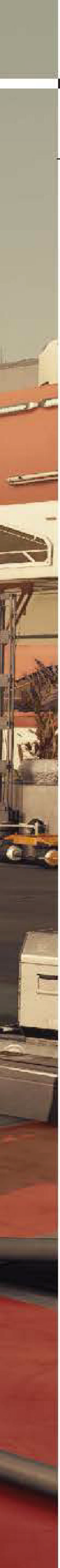
ROBIN VALENTINE
Specialist in
Jumping in portals
Currently playing
Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart, Starfield
This month
Summoned a freaky mushroom man to aid him in battle. You heard!

DOMINIC TARASON
Specialist in
Pirate arrrs
Currently playing
Shadow Gambit: The Cursed Crew, Starfield
This month
Walked around PCPP Towers with a parrot on his shoulder.

RICK LANE
Specialist in
Looting while shooting
Currently playing
Remnant 2
This month
Consumed blazing hot videogame vindaloo. Then proceeded to find-a-loo. Ha ha! Pun!

MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Monkey business
Currently playing
Ape Out
This month
Threw humans off very tall buildings while laughing and listening to experimental Jazz.

HOPE TECH



NO MAN'S SKYRIM

STARFIELD may be Bethesda's biggest RPG, but it's far from its best

By Christopher Livingston

In my first 90 hours of *Starfield* I walked on over 100 planets, docked with two dozen space stations, blew up more than 50 ships, and smuggled contraband human organs and illegal religious texts. Then immediately got arrested for smuggling contraband human organs and illegal religious texts. Whoops.

The more I've played *Starfield*, the more I've liked it, and for the same reasons I enjoy Bethesda's other RPG sandboxes. It's got the fun collision between structured quests and unpredictable systems which create moments that feel more personal and memorable than many other games.

It took me a while to get there. *Starfield*'s introduction is unusually straightforward for a Bethesda RPG, and the first handful of places you visit, including the game's capital city of New Atlantis, are pretty dull. It took about a dozen hours before I started having real fun, and after rolling credits on the main quest with one character and ignoring that quest to become an aspiring drug kingpin with another, I can finally say that, in the end, I do like *Starfield*.

But I don't love *Starfield*. And that's genuinely disappointing because I've loved each of Bethesda's RPGs since 2006's *Oblivion*. *Starfield* is Bethesda's biggest RPG ever, and it shares even more DNA with *Skyrim* and *Fallout 4* than I expected – but it ultimately falls short of the greatness of both of those games.

SLOW LIFTOFF

Bethesda RPGs have a history of awesome opening sequences: the assassination plot and escape through the sewers in *Oblivion*, living through your entire childhood in *Fallout 3*, and of course the iconic wagon trip to your execution in *Skyrim*. So it's almost startling how straightforward *Starfield*'s opener is.

It's the year 2330 and humankind has colonised the galaxy, and you're a miner on a distant planet who finds a mysterious artefact during your first day on the job. Then things happen quickly: you shoot some pirates, learn to fly a spaceship, and meet a few explorers who are part of a group called Constellation, looking to find more artefacts like yours. I kept waiting for some 'wow' moment that would make the tutorial feel less like a tutorial, but the only surprising thing about my introduction to *Starfield* was that it didn't contain any surprises.

> I finally began to see flashes of Bethesda brilliance

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Bethesda's long-awaited, huge honkin' space RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
$119.95

DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

REVIEWED ON
Intel i7-9700K, RTX 4070 Ti, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Heck no

LINK
bethesda.net/en/game/starfield

Thankfully, once I'd left the early hours behind I finally began to see flashes of Bethesda brilliance. First it was via the traits I'd chosen during character creation: one trait gave me parents, a retired middle-aged mom and dad, with the downside that I had to support them with a weekly cash allowance. At first my folks were simply sweet and supportive – impressed with my new job at Constellation, telling me they'd heard about some of my exploits on the news – but later they began popping up unexpectedly and hilariously in places you wouldn't expect to see your ageing parents. My space-folks eventually became one of my favourite parts of *Starfield* as they had their own little adventure in the background of my grander one, and their cameos around the galaxy were never pinpointed with a quest marker, particularly refreshing for a Bethesda game. Even just that single trait (and you can pick up to three in character creation) added more to my character's experience than any of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s disappointing 'lifepaths' did.

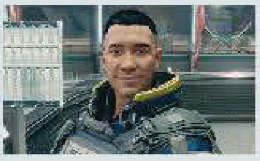
I was also relieved to finally meet an interesting Constellation companion, Andreja. She still wasn't on par with earlier Bethesda RPG companions and the romance didn't exactly give me butterflies, but her complicated, slowly-revealed past and an excellent performance by actor Cissy Jones made me fond of her just the same. Most importantly, traveling with Andreja buffed my stealth and pickpocketing skills, and when I shoved a bunch of extra weapons into her inventory because they were too heavy for me to carry, she selected a massive gatling gun to wield as her primary. Now that's romantic as hell.

FACTION ACTION

While New Atlantis didn't charm me, there are better settlements out there. Akila City is a rustic Wild West town on an untamed planet – with muddy streets and busy saloons it's a bit like the town of Valentine from *Red Dead Redemption 2* got launched into

GUILD WARS

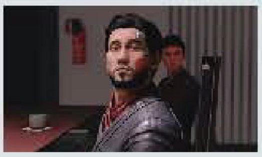
Here's the lowdown on factions



UNITED COLONIES
They're space cops, but joining up will give you a quest that's reminiscent of the film Aliens.

FREESTAR COLLECTIVE
More space cops, but at least they're cowboy themed so you get to show off some drip.

CRIMSON FLEET
Space pirates, with a cool lair on a space station. Plus if you join them, pirates won't attack you.



RYUJIN INDUSTRIES
Stealthy skullduggery and industrial espionage. The thieves guild, but in space.

Starfield

space. A crusty old marshal in a leather duster enlisted me to deal with a bank robbery the moment I moseyed into town – who better to help him negotiate a tense hostage situation with heavily armed outlaws than a complete stranger?

I quickly signed up to be a space ranger in the Freestar Collective – they're still basically cops like the United Colonies, but at least they dress with panache. And that kicked off a series of faction quests beginning with a classic Western premise: a humble farmer being run off their land by hired thugs. It was a long and enjoyable series of connected quests leading through some cool sci-fi environments like a huge mech graveyard and a mining operation inside a crystal-filled asteroid. There were plenty of shootouts, a couple of fugitive hunts and a big bad guy who needed to be toppled, just like in any good Western. It also introduced some interesting lore to *Starfield*'s universe as anger and bitterness over a war long past came bubbling to the surface.

While I was enjoying being a space cowboy, I was also enduring the main story quests, which mostly involve the gathering of more artefacts. Those missions could sometimes prove interesting, such as when an artefact had already been found by someone else, like an eccentric collector who had turned his massive starship into a museum of oddities and wasn't willing to part with his favourite exhibit. But mostly these missions are just about battling through scores of enemies in abandoned mines or science labs. They also eventually introduce a recurring enemy who I slowly realised functions like *Skyrim*'s dragons – a high-level menace that randomly turns up when you're trying to get other things done, leading to a fight that's pretty much always the same. It may not be a dragon this time, but it's most definitely a drag.

> **The shooting felt just as good as it did in *Fallout 4* (minus VATS)**

More disappointing is a surprisingly repetitive collection of main quests to visit a series of ancient temples, missions that are so similar in format it genuinely feels like Bethesda just copy-pasted them onto different planets. There's almost nothing to them: land on a planet, run for about a thousand uneventful metres in a straight line to reach the temple, then go inside and for an identical activity in each one. The rewards are different and occasionally quite good (yes, I'm being deliberately vague) but these temple quests are interesting exactly once, the very first time, and then after that become the definition of a mindless chore.

At least the story of the main quest is a creative one. When I first learned *Starfield* was about finding mysterious ancient artefacts buried deep inside planets, I figured I knew how it would end up, and I'm happy to say I was completely wrong (and even happier to say that pretty much everyone posting story theories on Reddit is also completely wrong). The story of *Starfield*'s main quest genuinely surprised me on more than one occasion (to be precise: two occasions), and being surprised is never a bad thing. The conclusion of the main quest also gives rise, quite brilliantly, to *Starfield*'s New Game+, allowing you to retain your character and skills while starting over from the beginning in a way that makes perfect sense within the game's story.

PACKING HEAT

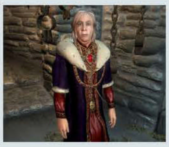
I talked my way out of a lot of jams in *Starfield* – I even managed to peacefully settle the very last face-off of the main story quest – but it's also got the longest, biggest battles I can remember in a Bethesda RPG. Luckily, the shooting felt just as good as it did in *Fallout 4* (minus VATS) and I came across so many guns I liked that I had trouble fitting them all in my radial menu. Early on I found a pistol that ignores armour completely, making it feel like a cheat code that ends fights early (especially once I ranked up my pistol skill a few times) and a rifle that does more damage with each successful hit, forming the best incentive for never missing a shot. I have a bullpup that occasionally does radioactive damage, a sniper rifle that does double damage against a target with full health, and a laser pistol I'd love to see the patent for because it somehow causes its victims to drop more health kits than they normally would. I dabbled a bit with weapon modding, which is quite similar to *Fallout 4*'s tinkering system, but it hardly seemed worth it due to the sheer number and variety of guns, loads of them already outfitted with mods and attachments, I'd come across on missions or exploring.

Complementing my arsenal is my boostpack, which lets me launch into the air during combat, and the lower the gravity on the planet I'm on, the higher and faster I can boost. Ambushed by serpent-worshiping fanatics or enormous angry space roaches? No problem. Just launch 20 feet straight up into the air and fire down at the top of their heads (enemies and companions can boost, too, but only a little here and there. You're basically the Dragonborn of jetpacks).

In general, movement in *Starfield* is majorly improved over earlier Bethesda games, especially since your character will grab ledges, edges, corners, tree branches and nearly anything else you collide with so you can mantle yourself up and over catwalks, rooftops, spaceships, or most anything in your way. Someone ought to mod *Starfield*'s movement system into *Skyrim*: you could

BLASTING OFF *Rating the opening sequences of Bethesda's RPGs*

FALLOUT 3
You're literally born and then grow up in Vault 101. Best. Tutorial. Ever. **10/10**



OBLIVION
Meet Patrick Stewart, then flee assassins in the sewers under Imperial City. Fantastic. **9/10**

FALLOUT 4
Your idyllic suburb gets nuked as you seek shelter in a Vault then get frozen for 210 years. **8/10**

SKYRIM
"You're finally awake" is iconic, but the dragon attack? Honestly a bit dull. **7/10**

STARFIELD
Find a weird space artefact, kill some space pirates, meet some nice space explorers. **6/10**

Photomode lets you pose in front of some stellar views.

FAR LEFT: Hundreds of worlds await, though don't expect them all to be interesting.

LEFT: Meet the team dedicated to solving space mysteries from their swanky pad.

8 SPACER
30
HEALTH
30 | 1245
SPACER HYENA
CO2

Boarding enemy ships for a long, close-quarters battle is the best.

A few colourful characters make your adventure more interesting.

RIGHT: New Atlantis is just a little too generic feeling to impress me.

FAR RIGHT: Some alien critters are mean, and some are nice, or at least neutral.

Zero-G combat is loads of fun, but strangely there isn't all that much of it.

clamber up to High Hrothgar in under a minute.

TOO BIG TO FILL

Sapping a bit of my enthusiasm for being a helpful star-hopping cowboy was the star-hopping itself. I never expected *Starfield* to be the sort of fully open-ended spaceship sim *Elite Dangerous* is, or for it to replicate the freedom of flight in *No Man's Sky*, but it's hard not to feel like there's something missing here: I never felt excitement or awe, no goosebumps as my engines fired, no sense of grandeur as I set down on a new world. That's because despite cruising from one end of the galaxy to the other in *Starfield*, I never felt like I was really going anywhere.

> **I don't know how else to describe it: exploring planets is fine**

Click a star on a galaxy map and it'll show you a solar system. Click a planet and it'll zoom in. Click the planet's moon to zoom in again, click the spot you'd like to land (anywhere but the ocean), then watch a cutscene of yourself landing. Space travel, docking, boarding and getting onto and off your ship is a series of cutscenes, black screens and loading screens. Even though it's what I was expecting, it still feels underwhelming. For anyone hoping for passenger or cargo missions, there are some but they're pretty unsatisfying since they can be completed with a few simple clicks. As the hours pass, travel starts to feel somehow both too fast (I clicked a location on the map and now I'm already standing on it?) and too slow (do I really have to watch the same docking cutscene every single time I visit a space station?).

STAR CITIZEN

Then there's all those planets and moons themselves. My incendiary take on *Starfield*'s 1,000+ planets after years of anticipation? They're fine.

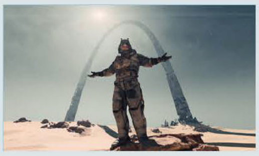
I don't know how else to describe it: exploring planets is fine. Many are dull, lifeless orbs, as you'd expect to find in a semi-realistic galaxy. Others are genuinely lovely and my first order of business was to drop a beacon so I could build a base there. Most star systems have at least one planet with abundant plant life and alien critters skittering, stomping, or flapping around, and even barren worlds have points of interest scattered across the segment of the planet you land in.

Some of those points can be vaguely interesting, like a huge fungal forest (and the bodies of some careless botanists who visited them without helmets on), the remnants of a stunningly large industrial outpost, a massive jagged upheaval of ice or a towering rock structure that just about makes it worthwhile to run for thousand uneventful metres across the surface of the planet to take a photo of. Thing is, these sights are interesting the first time, but not the fifth time.

What's really missing in *Starfield*'s planetary exploration is what happens in other Bethesda RPGs: you head out toward your destination and get completely distracted along the way: meeting an NPC, hearing a nearby dispute, stumbling onto a new quest, and never quite getting the place you intended to without finding in a half-dozen new things to add to your to-do list. You get some of that in *Starfield*'s cities, and occasionally you'll pick up a signal or be hailed by ship when entering the orbit of a planet, but not while exploring the surface of a planet itself.

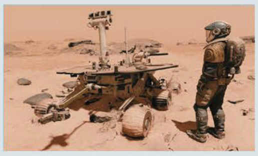
HOME SWEET ROAM

Spend a little time in the classic solar system



EARTH

It's seen better days, but there's still a few wonders of the world left to visit.



MARS

The Red Planet is still a hub for humans who never made it into deep space, so pop in for a visit.

THE MOON

If memory serves, there's a historic spot somewhere on the moon. It'll make a great photo op.

SATURN

You can't land on Saturn, but pick a moon, any moon, and you can gawk at its rings all you want.

EQUIPMENT MALFUNCTION

Part of me was hoping *Starfield*'s long years of development and ten-month delay would lead to a more polished experience. Nah. There's as much Bethesda jank on display in *Starfield* as there ever was. Most of it is harmless and occasionally comical, but in terms of genuine, irritating bugs that get in the way of the playing, I didn't have all that many (this isn't a *Cyberpunk 2077* launch situation, in other words).

The systems you use almost constantly are lacking: maps, minigames and inventory. If you visit a planet and want to return later, there's no way to bookmark it on the star map (other than planting a base beacon on it, though you have a limited number of those) so I'd advise taking notes while you play. The inventory system is truly rotten, frustrating in a game where you're collecting anything and everything and trying to shuffle items between your companion, your ship's inventory, your storage crates at your base, and your own pockets.

After all the hype and hope and anticipation, I'm disappointed to say I don't love *Starfield* the way I love other Bethesda RPGs. It's similar in a lot of ways, but *Starfield* never feels as instantly engrossing and transporting as *Oblivion* or *Skyrim* or as wild and weird as the *Fallout* games. It comes close on occasion: one settlement on a far-flung planet is right up there with the most entertaining Vault-Tec experiments of all time. But more often the promising premises I found in remote bases or mysterious space stations tended to fizzle out. *Starfield*'s alien bugs, even the truly monstrous ones, don't hold a candle to *Skyrim*'s menagerie of beasts, and though *Starfield*'s spacers and *Fallout*'s raiders probably share the same basic code (rush and attack player on sight) they just don't have as much personality.

So, I don't love *Starfield*, but I was happy to discover that I do like it. Those first 90 hours I played were far from perfect, but I've got plenty of reasons to play 90 more. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

***Starfield* shares plenty of DNA with *Skyrim* and *Fallout 4*, but it ultimately falls short of both.**

75

PURE MAGIC

BALDUR'S GATE III is a dream RPG that was worth the 23-year wait

By Fraser Brown

After spending 160 hours unravelling conspiracies, setting fire to monsters and finding increasingly fancy hats for my Bard, I can now confidently say that *Baldur's Gate III* is the greatest RPG I've ever played. If I wasn't writing this review, I'd be rolling a brand-new character and jumping in for another hundred hours. I've got it bad.

It's my dream game: the best parts of *Ultima*, *Baldur's Gate*, *Planescape: Torment*, *Arcanum: Of Steamworks* and *Divinity: Original Sin*. But it also does so much more than tap into the RPG greatest hits, finding a way to unite disparate philosophies like cinematic storytelling, unhinged sandbox mayhem and tabletop-style roleplaying. Yes, it says, you can have your cake and eat it too.

> **Each of the three acts could be their own epic RPG**

And boy is it absolutely massive, as deep as it is wide. Each of the three acts could be their own epic RPG, jam-packed with elaborate dungeons, strikingly memorable quests and unique stakes, supported by systems that offer a huge amount of player freedom. It is a game overflowing with crossroads, with every step conjuring up yet more paths trying to seduce you off the beaten track.

VENTURE FORTH

The opening act sees you wrestling with the revelation that you've been infected with a parasite – a tadpole – that will eventually transform you into a monstrous mind flayer, stripping away your identity and free will as you become an agent of the Grand Design, attempting to bring about a universe where everyone is an evil squid monster. But that initial shock quickly makes way for a free-wheeling wilderness adventure evocative of classic D&D escapades.

There's a druid grove in peril, goblins everywhere, a mysterious swamp and the opportunity to adopt an owlbear cub. Please do – it's adorable. It's here that you'll meet the majority of your companions, who share your mind flayer curse, letting you fill out your party to better tackle the dangers of the Sword Coast. This is *Baldur's Gate III* at its most traditional, but even so it pushes against the familiar, using things like the lurking danger – and allure – of the tadpole to keep you on your toes. It bestows you with some of the powers of a mind flayer and encourages you to use them, manipulating your allies and enemies, with the promise of even more exotic powers.

With each act, there's not just a change in location but a change in tone as well. Act 2 has the most dramatic turn, with its shift into pure horror, all curses and twisted monsters and traumatised NPCs. There are shades of *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne* here, laden with an oppressive atmosphere and some truly unsettling creature designs. It's a welcome but harrowing change in direction. But so much of the game's tone is down to your choices. In Act 1, for instance, you might team up with the villains of the moment, butcher all the heroes and innocents, and completely change the whole act's vibe. You might not always know what story you're writing, but you're always its author.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A D&D romp through the Forgotten Realms

EXPECT TO PAY
$89.95

DEVELOPER
Larian Studios

PUBLISHER
Larian Studios

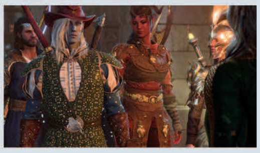
REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900k, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
Online and local co-op for up to four players

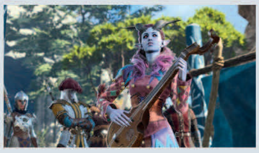
LINK
baldursgate3.game

BARD TO THE BONE

Why you should consider rolling a bard

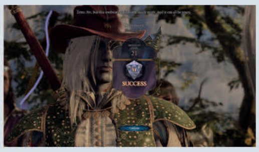


THE DRIP
With their big fancy hats and bejewelled tunics, bards are undeniably the slickest looking heroes in all of Faerûn.



THE INSTRUMENTS
Your instrument can be used to perform flashy bardic magic, but you can also put on musical performances, netting you gold.

THE PATTER
As a bard you get lots of unique dialogue options that often veer into the cheeky, salacious and, quite often, hilarious.



THE SKILLS
Bards are masters of persuasion and deception, while their focus on charisma and dexterity makes them well-rounded adventurers.

Horror is always waiting in the wings no matter what act you're adventuring in. Once I reached Baldur's Gate itself, in Act 3, I spent a good chunk of time trying to find the dismembered body parts of a murdered clown, in a quest that started off full of laughs and quickly veered into the horrific. But this urban setting also provided its own unique adventures full of political intrigue and criminal turf wars. The relentless variety of the quests feels like ten different tabletop campaigns combined, but Larian manages to keep things surprisingly cohesive.

FRIENDS FOR LIFE

The epic stakes are balanced out by the multitude of very intimate, personal stories – ones that are elevated by writing that never falls into the fantasy trap of becoming stiff or stuffy. The fate of the entire world hangs in the balance, but that's very much par for the course. Larian's writers make this matter by blessing the world with a bounty of rich characters who you'll become invested in as you spend hundreds of hours getting to know them.

Even though you have a great deal of control over what happens to your companions, they have a lot more agency than your usual RPG party members, including when it comes to romance, where they're usually the ones to instigate the change in your relationship. They have arguments and disagreements and agendas that are at odds with each other. And they never feel like they're just playing a supporting role. Their personal quests – each chock full of tragedy and conflict – are inextricably linked to the main quest, and every companion is treated as just as important as the player character. It's their story just as much as it's yours. Indeed, you can optionally play the entire game from their perspective, selecting them as an 'origin character' during character creation – though I recommend a custom character for your first playthrough.

One of my highlights was simply going on a cheesy date at a frankly terrible restaurant with Karlach, the tiefling barbarian whose supernatural might is fuelled by an Infernal Engine in her chest. A quiet, incredibly sweet moment between intensely violent fights against gods and demons and mind flayers. *Baldur's Gate III* is a very horny game, but it can also be genuinely romantic and nuanced. The relationships you encounter, both sexual and platonic, are complex, believable things, and miraculously manage to feel grounded even when magical WMDs, affairs with deities and pacts with devils are involved.

ANYTHING GOES

Baldur's Gate III fully embraces the flexible nature of D&D, turning it into an immersive sim where, if you can imagine it, you can probably do it. Every quest, puzzle and combat encounter has a ridiculous number of ways for you to tackle it, rewarding creativity at all times. Every time I thought, "It will never let me do this," I was proven wrong, with no cheesy tactic or exploitative loophole deemed out of bounds.

No cheesy tactic or exploitative loophole is out of bounds

Spells, skills and physical manipulation of the world around you opens up so many doors, literally and metaphorically. You can make a fight against a trio of ogres go your way by smashing the rickety pillars holding up the building they're hanging out in, turn into a gas to sneak your way through tiny cracks in a wall, or use magic to persuade animals to turn on their masters. You might never talk to a single squirrel, but every animal in this humongous game has dialogue. You can read minds, talk to the dead, create disguises, turn invisible and teleport yourself and allies across large distances, and these tricks can be used time and time again rather than just as one-off novelties.

As a dungeon master, developer Larian Studios is very permissive, though occasionally brutal. Experimentation is encouraged, but mistakes often lead to death. And this flexibility works both ways, with enemies also able to take advantage of your dirty tricks. So while you might be able to knock back a strength potion and push a boss off a cliff, ending an elaborate fight before it even starts, your whole party can also be knocked into oblivion. Just watch out for those sudden drops.

HIGH ROLLER

The spirit of D&D has been captured not just by *Baldur's Gate III*'s flexibility, but by its love of dice rolls as well. As you explore the world, passive rolls will be made against your perception skill, to determine if you've noticed a trap, a potential ambush or some buried treasure. Thankfully, even if your player character misses something, the rest of your party might be more alert.

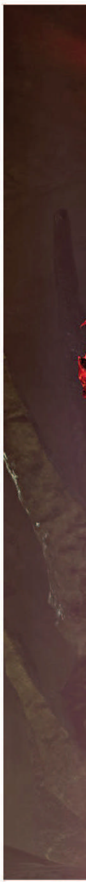
You'll be doing a lot of manual rolls, too, like when you're trying to pick a lock, disarm a trap, or just in conversation. The skills you get when you select your class and background constantly crop up, emphasising your earliest choices and encouraging you to roleplay. Sometimes you'll get unique dialogue options that don't require any rolls – as a bard I often get to crack jokes or spit out the occasional bit of poetry – but when I try to persuade or deceive someone, the dice come out. The mechanic is pleasingly tactile, and I've never felt so tense about making conversation choices before. It's brilliant and stressful and I'm no longer certain I can make decisions in my own life without dice now.

RNG can be a bit of a pain in the arse, true, but *Baldur's Gate III* sidesteps some of the pitfalls inherent in systems that employ so much randomness by giving you plenty of ways to augment your rolls. Spells, potions and proficiency bonuses can be applied to bump the number up, with your companions lending a hand too. It always feels like you're still in control. By making choices that match your chosen background, and those of your companions, you can also get Inspiration points, letting you reroll and take another swing.

POWERGAMING

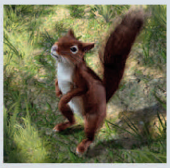
Compared to a lot of other RPGs, *Baldur's Gate III* has a fairly low level cap. Twelve levels doesn't sound like a lot, especially when you often won't actually be making any choices when you do level up. But this is less of an issue when you consider the vast amount of other ways you can develop your character.

The sheer number of magical items you'll encounter in your playthrough is enough to fill every shelf in Sorcerous Sundries, Baldur's



MASTER OF MAGIC

The spells every adventurer needs

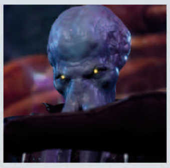


SPEAK WITH ANIMALS

Some of *Baldur's Gate III*'s funniest moments are down to its critters, but you'll never know without this brilliant spell.

SPEAK WITH DEAD

Corpses aren't nearly as fun as animals, but sometimes the dead will have information for you, especially if you're trying to solve their murder.



DETECT THOUGHTS

It's a bit rude to read someone's mind without permission, but you've got a world to save and no time for niceties.

COUNTERSPELL

Stop enemies from murdering you with magic by neutralising their spells. This can make some of the game's toughest battles a doddle.

FIREBALL

Sometimes you just want to set the world on fire. And if you do, then throwing around a few fireballs is how to do it. Seriously, they're deadly.

I carried this in my inventory for a whole day, so it must have started to pong.

FAR LEFT: Embrace your mind flayer powers and you can transform into this handsome boy.

LEFT: Even during the apocalypse there's always time for smooching.

Baldur's Gate III's triumvirate of arseholes.

Jaheira is one of several returning pals from the old games.

RIGHT: This is why Underdark dentists are all billionaires.

FAR RIGHT: Date night with my favourite beardy wizard.

There's nothing more vain than a vampire who still owns a mirror.

Gate's premier magical shop, a hundred times over. And many of them give you new spells and skills, completely changing your build. After finding a lot of lightning-themed gear I turned Gale into an invincible, electricity-spewing bomb who could just walk through the battlefield spitting out death while being completely immune to the fallout. He never left my side after that.

I'm not much of a min-maxer, especially not in story-driven RPGs, but *Baldur's Gate III* makes experimenting with weird builds an absolute delight. For me it's not so much about making tiny changes to squeeze a bit more damage here or there, but rather playing around with items and spells to see what sort of mayhem I can cause. And boy is there a lot of potential for mayhem. Who needs extra levels when you can shapeshift into an owlbear, cast the Enlarge spell, and then drop onto an enemy from a great height, turning into an earth-shattering meteor?

> **You can charge into battle with a sausage pilfered from a tavern**

MURDER AND MAYHEM

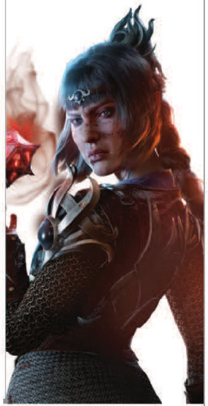
If it wasn't obvious from the whole owlbear meteor thing, *Baldur's Gate III*'s fights are wonderfully anarchic. It's a turn-based deal (outside of combat it's real-time by default, but with the option to switch to turn-based when you, say, want to time a sneaky infiltration of a monster-filled ruin) and is thus a bit slower than its predecessors when blood's getting spilled. It's also so much better.

Every scrap is an experimental, free-form puzzle filled to the brim with things to be fiddled around with: terrain, props, elemental effects, even the corpses can be weaponised. If you've never murdered a devil by throwing a dead gnome at it, you haven't lived. If you want, you can even charge into battle with a sausage pilfered from a tavern kitchen. But it's a joy even when you're not experimenting. Simply thwacking goblins with a big ol' sword is immensely satisfying, especially as you grow in power, going from a level 1 fighter who keeps missing their hits to a level 12 god-killer who can just keep swinging away multiple times a turn.

Larian has made the familiar roster of D&D spells and powers impressively flexible tools, especially in the way that they interact with the battlefields themselves. Instead of just firing Melf's Acid Arrow at a gnoll, you can instead fire it at the ground they're standing on, making the surface acidic. Then you can follow it up with Firebolt, which combines with the acid to create a fiery explosion. This is the system at its most basic, and as you unlock more elaborate spells things really kick off, allowing you to create AoE traps that can take out small armies.

TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

Embarking on this adventure can be pretty daunting, granted. D&D can be impenetrable for the uninitiated, and *Baldur's Gate III* is not an easy-going introduction to its rules and quirks. Even as a *Baldur's Gate* vet who also plays tabletop RPGs, I found it quite intimidating, and a lot of folk at PCG ended up starting the game again after 20 hours. It demands a lot of patience, then, and you might have to spend a lot of those early hours just figuring things out and muddling through. Once you've figured out D&D's eccentricities, though, you'll have a much better time.



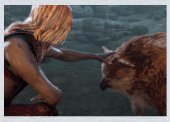
Keeping track of characters and quests can also be a real challenge, even with the quest journal helping. Sometimes the passage of time will lock you out of certain quests, but on other occasions it won't. I spent hours trying to access a location before moving onto the second act because of a pop-up implying that I was reaching a point of no return, only to discover that the location was in a different act, and that I could still return anyway, at least until an entirely different point of no return. The best way to avoid getting caught out is by saving way more than you think you'll need to – just in case.

Given the scope and complexity, though, I honestly expected to encounter more issues. I noticed a few minor bugs and one crash, but no problems since Larian started releasing hotfixes. Performance has been similarly smooth, though with an RTX 4090 and an i9-13900K, I'd be worried if it wasn't. On Steam Deck things were more iffy, but I'll happily deal with 20-30fps if it means I can play in bed.

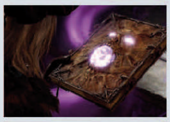
After reviewing a game this large, there's usually a sense of relief when I'm done. But not here. To be honest, I could have easily reached the game's climax days earlier, but I just couldn't bring myself to call it. I felt compelled to see as much as humanly possible in one playthrough because it's all just so bloody incredible. Whenever I found a new quest to distract me, I was overjoyed. Another reason to keep playing! More of the best-in-class writing, more of these gripping fights that have seen me duking it out well into the small hours of the morning, more magical artefacts to cram into my beautiful mess of an inventory. I'm genuinely gutted that it's over. So I guess there's only one solution: start all over again. I'm buzzing with excitement. ■

BUCKET LIST

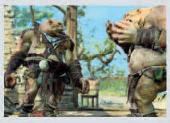
Five things to do in the Sword Coast before you die



ADOPT AN OWLBEAR CUB
After you ruthlessly murder an owlbear in Act I, you can eventually adopt its cub, slightly making up for your bloodlust. It's adorable.

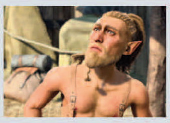


READ SOME WEIRD FANFIC
Did you know that brothels have libraries? Apparently they do, at least in *Baldur's Gate*, and you'll find some literature inside.



RECRUIT SOME OGRES
You'll meet some ogres in the Blighted Village, and if you can avoid becoming their dinner, you can summon them in battle.

DIG FOR TREASURE
The people of Faerûn love to bury chests everywhere. So make sure you carry a spade at all times, as you can dig them up and loot them.



WEAPONISE A GNOME
You can pick up nearly everything in *Baldur's Gate III*, and that includes gnomes, which you can then throw at your enemies.

PC PowerPlay **VERDICT**

Baldur's Gate III is an unrivalled RPG that will swallow your life whole. And that's a good thing, it really is.

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FOILED AGAIN

EN GARDE! is a brief yet riotous piece of swashbuckling nostalgia

By Jon Bailes

In *En Garde!* 17th century Spain is slathered with a sense of nostalgia. Not for the setting itself, of course – I'm not that old – although it is an enticing reimagining, with its piñata colour palette and kitsch flamenco soundtrack. Rather, because it reminds me of Asterix books, of Dogtanian cartoons, and black and white episodes of Zorro on Sunday mornings. Of simpler times, in other words, and simpler forms of entertainment.

Playing this swashbuckling adventure, meanwhile, tickles a different memory gland. *En Garde!* is like the remaster of an early 2000s console effort that never existed, from a time when developers were figuring out how the scrolling beat-'em-up might evolve into three dimensions. Superficially, it bears a family resemblance to *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, but it's narrower in scope, more cheap and cheerful. Your charge, Adalia de Volador, is equipped with a rapier but also a barrel of wisecracks aimed as much at the genre as her arch-nemesis.

Combat is where the difference really counts, though. Adalia understands that a good action scene doesn't merely entail swordplay, but acrobatics, pratfalls and an Ikea's worth of broken furniture. As much as she'll back herself in a one-on-one duel, guards don't queue up and wait their turn. Victories are thus earned by prancing around, using what comes to hand, until your swordswomanship can come to the fore.

SURPRISE ATTACK

Like Monty Python's Spanish Inquisition, in fact, your chief weapon here is surprise. Do something stylish or unexpected and an exclamation mark pops up over nearby enemies' heads. You might then get a free hit in, or use Adalia's boot to propel them into a wall, cracking their defences more permanently. As for what causes surprise, well, quite a lot. Kick some boxes towards a group as they close in, perhaps, or chuck a jug at one of their heads, or a lantern at something explosive, or drop a chandelier when someone's standing beneath it. Once you've bought time, duelling itself is a clean yet tense affair. Blue attacks can be parried, red must be dodged, with each success gaining you a moment to whittle down your foe's guard.

Still, it's easier said than done, and *En Garde!* can get quite tricky to tame. Mostly that's in the right way, with sharp rules and controls ensuring any mishaps are yours to own. An auto-lock feature sensibly targets the nearest aggressor unless you push towards another, while the camera is happy to hang back a little to frame the action. Busy later levels do expose occasional problems, but in the main these systems are pleasingly elegant. It helps also that there's a real sense of focus in how to play *En Garde!*, and wisely it doesn't overcomplicate the fun with levelling up, or skill trees, or combos and additional weapons.

> **Could do with a little more substance besides the combat**

It could do with a little more substance besides the combat, however. *The Prince of Persia* parallels also derive from Adalia's platforming acrobatics, for instance, as she swings on poles or bounces on hanging nets to cross gaps, but nothing much comes of them. Getting from A to B is never more involving than spotting the next grab point and flinging yourself in its direction. Alternatively, stronger humour may have rounded off the package. The game's silliness undoubtedly sets the right mood, but it trusts far too much in the comedic potential of exaggerated Spanish accents, and while the quips that rattle back and forth between Adalia and her foes land sporadically, more often than not, eyes will roll.

You might say that's all part of the nostalgia, but the whiff of vintage also makes *En Garde!* feel somewhat limited, a point driven home when you swashbuckle through it in under four hours, with only the prospect of doing it better to pull you back in. Fine if you want to hone your skills, but this also feels like a tacit admission that *En Garde!* has already exhausted itself. Perhaps nostalgia works best that way, though, but it's not fulfilling to live in the past. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cartoon swashbuckler in which combat is as much about showing off and using the scenery as striking your opponent.

EXPECT TO PAY
$29.95

DEVELOPER
Fireplace Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

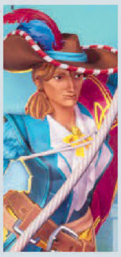
REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070

MULTIPLAYER
No

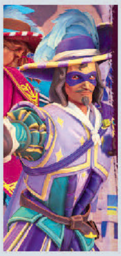
LINK
engarde-game.com

RAPIER WITS

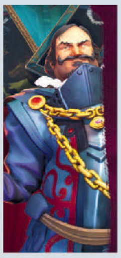
Meet the four main characters



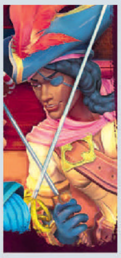
ADALIA
Our confident and cocky hero with unmatched fencing skills, a strong sense of what's right for her community and a reckless adventurer's will to match.



ALEJANDRO
Brother to Adalia, he fancies himself as a hero too, but lacks his sister's panache. Also bears a resemblance to the mysterious 'El Vigilante'.



COUNT DUKE
The local authority whose hobbies include raising taxes and hatching schemes to make himself even richer at the expense of the poor.



ZAIDA
A famed outlaw who's after the count duke's fortune for her own purposes. Adalia is starstruck and enamoured by her presence, but should she be trusted?

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Fireplace Games' *En Garde!* flares brightly with its slick, slapstick combat, for a while at least.

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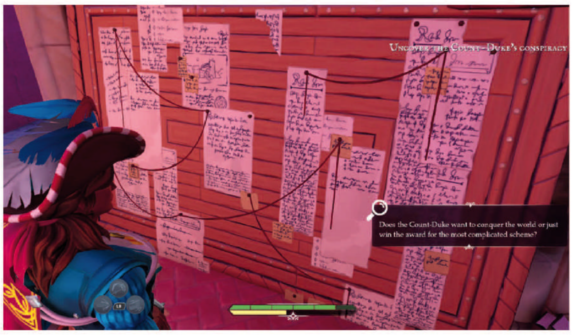


UNCOVER THE COUNT-DUKE'S CONSPIRACY

Does the Count-Duke want to conquer the world or just win the award for the most complicated scheme?

Making use of the environment in combat is key.

ABOVE: This. Is. California!

FAR LEFT: Can Adalia figure out the truth?

LEFT: Sword play is frenetic and fun.

PIECES OF GREAT

Gunfire Games makes subverting expectations a habit in REMNANT 2

By Rick Lane

I am a space ninja, carving up robot sentinels on an artificial planet stranded in time. A few hours ago, I was blasting cockney elves off a dilapidated clocktower with a gun that fires cubes. Before that, I was having my life drained by a cursed boardgame in an antechamber of a vast golden palace. Oh, and let's not forget the time I chased my friend through an ancient temple as he was dragged underground by a sentient tree.

If variety is the spice of life, then *Remnant 2* is a blazing hot videogame vindaloo. It can barely go half an hour without throwing some weird mystery box at your feet, and only half the time do its contents pop out to kill you. As someone who deeply distrusts the Skinner-box feedback loops of cooperative looter-shooters, *Remnant 2* completely bypasses my cynicism about the genre. It does this by giving me exactly what I want from gaming, namely unique and exciting adventures with my pals that never rely on the numbers going up to keep me planted in my chair.

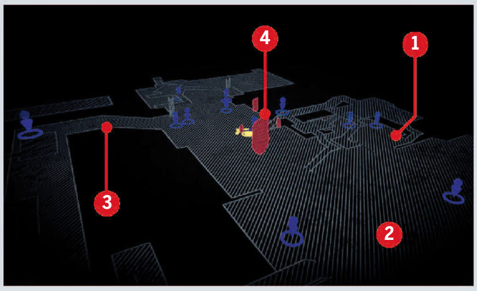
That might sound straightforward enough, but *Remnant 2* is a deceptively complex bit of game design. Everything from the bosses you encounter to the quests you embark on may be completely different from another group's adventure, and you'll fittingly only ever see a fragment of what the game offers on a single run.

All this was true with 2019's *Remnant: From the Ashes*, and the sequel paints on a bigger canvas with finer brushes. You see lessons have been learned straightaway, in how much quicker *Remnant 2* gets to the fun stuff. Like the first game, *Remnant 2* starts out with your custom-made character journeying across a post-apocalyptic Earth that, until recently, had been ravaged by a hostile tree-like race of creatures known as the Root. In the first game, it was a dirge of an opening that lasted several tedious hours. In the sequel, you're on Earth long enough to complete the tutorial, and that's it. Within 40 minutes, you've discovered the conclave of survivors and travelled through to a new realm.

> **You'll only ever see a fragment of what the game offers on a single run**

MAP-TASTIC

Remnant 2's map and minimap are superbly designed



1 PATHS Clear delineation between main and side paths.

2 3D 3D makes elevation easily comprehensible.

3 DEFINITION Clear definition of pathways.

4 COLOUR Colour-coded points of interest.

5 UNEXPLORED Not pictured, unexplored areas are coloured red.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Procedurally generated looter-shooter with tough combat and a wild imagination

EXPECT TO PAY
$73.50

DEVELOPER
Gunfire Games

PUBLISHER
Gearbox

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER
2-3 player coop

LINK
remnantgame.com

That starting realm could be one of three. I ended up in Yaesha, a fae realm home to a race of satyr-like creatures known as the Pan. But there's an equal chance you could end up in Ne'rud. My favourite realm, however, is Losomn, a mirror-world where two reflections of a gilded palace are connected by a sprawling low-fantasy cityscape prowled by people wielding rifles and farm tools.

RECURRING LEVEL TILES

All these environments are procedurally generated, and while I spotted a few recurring level tiles on my adventure, *Remnant 2*'s maps felt unique and hand-crafted most of the time. Yet what impresses most is not how these spaces look, but how rewarding they are to explore. Each world has several 'main' areas which typically include two or three side dungeons. But every element is randomly assembled, including the adventures you'll experience. Venturing into a Losomn sewer, I met a despondent fellow who asked me to look for his wife, which meant searching through piles of bones amassed by vicious werewolf-like creatures. The clocktower I mentioned in the opening was the culmination of another quest, one that involved navigating between two separate areas to solve a puzzle. Some quests have multiple potential resolutions, while others actively seek you out, literally yanking you into a new area. All, some, or none of this could happen to you on your adventure. The blue elf lady who's been forefront of the marketing for *Remnant 2*? Never saw her. Not once.

There's a potential counter argument here, which is, "Why not let people experience everything in one go?" Well, speaking personally, I prefer a game that takes 20 hours to complete and leaves me wanting more, than one that takes 100 hours to complete and leaves me wondering how the hell I'll find the time to play it again. This approach also makes a

The best boy.

Postulant's Parlor

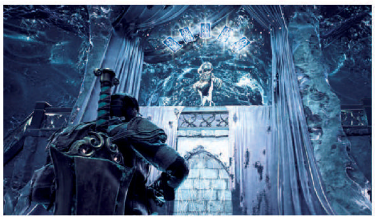
FAR LEFT: Well, at least it isn't Mousetrap.

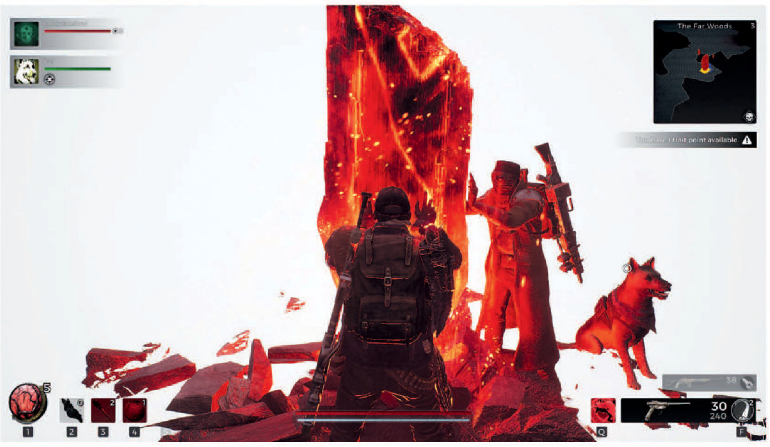
LEFT: Weirdly, *Remnant 2* has extremely good books.

Ever feel like you're being watched?

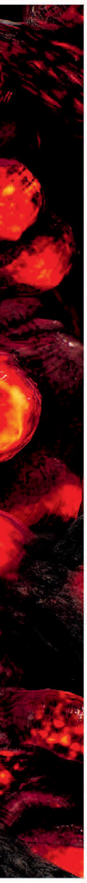
RIGHT: Get a load of David Blaine over here.

FAR RIGHT: My mum told me not to go around touching weird crystals.




The Far Woods
30
240

The...eh? I...eh? What?



run of *Remnant 2* feel pacey and purposeful, like a pastime rather than a project.

BIGGEST SURPRISES

Naturally, *Remnant 2* saves its biggest surprises for its bosses, although I'll say right now that not every boss is brilliant. A few dungeons I explored ended with me fighting a souped-up version of a regular enemy, while my first run of the game pitted me against not one but two amorphous blobs. On the other side of that coin, however, is a giant alien god that can punch through reality, and a living Root hive that crushes the platforms you fight it from. The standout encounter is against a creature called the Labyrinth Sentinel. I won't describe this in detail because it was such a fantastic surprise, but it's a sequence you might see if David Lynch directed an Indiana Jones movie. It's destined to become a regular feature in internet Best Boss Fight discussions, entirely original and utterly thrilling.

As a list of cool things to see, *Remnant 2* is longer than a loo roll. But you can see a lot of weird stuff on Instagram too, and you won't pay 70 bucks for the privilege. Fortunately, behind *Remnant 2*'s surreal sightseeing tour is a thoroughly entertaining shooter. Mechanically, it gets the basics right. Movement is breezy but not weightless, the starting weapons are satisfying to wield, and your dodge-roll is nimble and has a generous invulnerability window. More broadly, the way *Remnant 2* filters combat encounters into its procedurally generated levels impresses. Enemies attack from all angles, requiring you to be constantly vigilant about your surroundings. But it isn't an endless, shapeless onslaught either. It ebbs and flows between tense and intense.

Combat becomes more distinctive when you fold in new weapons and archetypes – *Remnant*'s word for classes. *Remnant* isn't a *Borderlands*-style gun-fest, where incrementally better weapons are scattered like chewing gum on a pavement. Instead, you receive a couple of starting firearms that'll remain handy for most of the game, but can be modified with special alt-fire modes. Alongside these, you'll occasionally pick up completely new weapons that function in vastly different ways. For example, I crafted a weapon called Twisted Arbalest that fired a stone discus which bounced rapidly between enemies. This made it fantastic for crowd control, but less effective against tough single opponents, a trade-off I compensated for with a fast-firing secondary weapon. Weirdly though, none of this applies to armour. There are some nifty armour sets to collect in *Remnant 2*, but they can't be crafted or modified.

> **Overall though, combat is both entertaining and rewarding**

Archetypes, meanwhile, grow more interesting as you progress. Of the six starting archetypes, I spent most of my time with the Handler, as it's comfortably the best class for mixed solo and cooperative play. The Handler is accompanied by an AI dog that not only helps you fight enemies, but can buff you with its howl and, most crucially, revive you if you're downed in combat. Each archetype has a mixture of active abilities and passive perks that level up as you progress through the game, and once you hit level ten you can equip a second archetype and mix its abilities with your own. So you could combine your Handler with the Hunter archetype, and boost your ranged damage. Alternatively, you could combine your starting Archetype with one of several secret archetypes, unlocked through exploration, such as the Alchemist, who can drop vials of concoctions for various buffs.

It's a well thought out system, but it isn't what you'll play the game for, simply because so much of the progression is either automated or passive. For example, you can unlock around 30 different Traits that can be upgraded to provide passive bonuses, but it's all tiny gains like +1% Damage Reduction or +10% Mod Power Generation. Useful over time, but very unsexy. All the fun happens in weapon and weapon mod crafting.

ENTERTAINING COMBAT

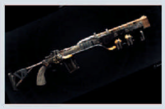
Overall though, combat is both entertaining and rewarding. The same can't be said for *Remnant*'s overarching narrative, however. There are tons of interesting stories hidden within *Remnant 2*'s world, in the form of sidequests, individual world stories, and narrative asides like custom-written fables that you can leaf through in ancient libraries. The main plot, however, is even more incidental than last time, a 'find three things to save the universe' affair that is very basic and lacks any interesting twists or characters. It revolves heavily around a young woman called Clementine, who you spend precisely five minutes with before she is abducted by a strange inter-realm entity, and thus you never get the chance to form any relationship with the character. What's doubly odd is that you start the game accompanied by a completely different female character who is your avatar's closest friend. But once you arrive at Ward 13, this character is immediately relegated to NPC merchant.

I can't imagine how hard it must be to write a coherent story for a game this wide-ranging, especially given large portions of *Remnant 2*'s campaign are procedural. But this is also exactly why *Remnant 2* needs it. Without a neatly threaded story or a consistent cast of side characters, *Remnant 2* can, at times, feel like a bunch of random cool shit Gunfire Games has tossed into a blender.

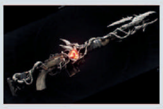
Still, perhaps that's the price for a game that refreshes itself with every other step you take. I might not take any unifying life lesson from *Remnant 2*, but there are a dozen smaller moments that'll be bouncing around my head for a good while, and that doesn't include the ones I haven't seen yet. ■

ROCKING MODS

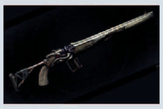
Mods alter the function of your weapon



HOTSHOT
This reliable starter mod turns your regular ammo into highly damaging incendiary rounds.



TREMOR
A root-based mod, Tremor launches a sphere onto the ground that triggers earthquakes.



BORE
A nasty mod which fires a drillbit into your enemy's body, dealing some damage over time.

PC PowerPlay **VERDICT**

***Remnant 2* is a dependable looter shooter made special by its boundless capacity to surprise.**

84

ARMORED & DANGEROUS

ARMORED CORE VI: FIRES OF RUBICON is every bit the revival this mech series deserved

By Wes Fenlon

After FromSoftware's incredible run from *Souls* to *Sekiro* to *Elden Ring*, *Armored Core VI* is a near-radical departure: short, relentlessly paced missions, forgiving retries, and an empowering arsenal that makes it clear you are a one mech army instead of some nasty little guy. Its lean approach holds it back in a few minor ways, but a big budget game this dead set on what it is and what it is not is a precious thing in 2023.

It may have taken FromSoftware a decade to return to its love of mechs, but it was worth the wait: *Armored Core VI* is a 'we're back on our bullshit' slam dunk.

This would be a great action game in any year, but I'm particularly smitten with *Armored Core* at this moment in time, sandwiched between epic 100-hour RPGs and following the success of the boundless *Elden Ring*. It could scarcely be more *Elden Ring*'s opposite: instead of being dumped into a wide open world, you select missions from a menu and then deploy your mech after a short briefing. Missions are usually over inside 10 minutes and are 100% protein, either hurling you straight into a short frenzied battle or peppering larger environments with snack-sized combat encounters that culminate in 1v1 showdowns against other ACs or massive bosses. After each, returning to the menu to tinker with your AC and buy new parts is a well-earned exhale.

I can imagine concocting these scenarios in a childhood sandbox, staging my action figures for battle atop moist parapets and upside-down bucket mountains and then knocking them over one-by-one with my favourite Gundam.

This is Top Gun: Maverick for anime nerds like me

Armored Core VI's missions are that simple in construction and that thrilling in action. It allows you to snap together the pieces of your ultimate mech and then manifests those imagined backyard battles with a pink and neon green death machine that can make it rain lasers and hellfire, no mouth sounds needed. *Armored Core VI* prizes nothing as much as fulfilling the fantasy of piloting one of these machines and feeling cool while you do it.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?	All-out mecha action
EXPECT TO PAY	$89.95
DEVELOPER	FromSoftware
PUBLISHER	Bandai Namco
REVIEWED ON	Intel Core i5-13600K, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070
MULTIPLAYER	Yes
LINK	playarmoredcore.com

LASER FOCUS

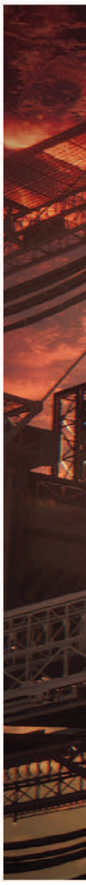
This is Top Gun: Maverick for anime nerds like me who grew up enraptured by Mobile Suit Gundam instead of F-14s. I will spend the next few months restraining myself from commandeering Discord chats to talk about the articulation of these mechs, and the little jolts of glee I got from watching each individual thruster change direction as I skated along the ground. And watching the hot flames flickering out and turning to steam when standing still. And the neon bloom of a plasma blade felling a lowly mech or an entire battleship in one charged up blow.

I always find one sound effect to hyperfixate on in a FromSoftware game – *in Dark Souls*, it's the bwaaam of parrying with a shield, a sound so concussive it gives 'anti-tank rifle' rather than 'little guy swinging his arm through the air'. It's ludicrous, but also makes perfect sense for the most powerful sound effect to play when you are, for a moment, literally invincible. Halfway through *Armored Core VI* I found my new love: the DUN-DUN of Songbirds, a double-barrelled cannon that fires anti-tank rounds in a burst.

Each shot packs six times the explosive power of a single missile and far more impact damage, sending heavily armoured four-legged mechs reeling when I score a clean hit. With Songbirds mounted on each shoulder I could even stagger bosses in a single volley – DUN-DUN, DUN-DUN – opening them up to extra damage from a slash of my laser blade. That staccato explosion became the death knell for every mech on Rubicon.

FASHION CORES

Helping sell the 'hell yeah mechs rule' tone is *Armored Core VI* being FromSoftware's first PC game to support frame rates over 60fps. While it's still lacking some bells and whistles, the game ran fantastically on my PC with the 120fps limit enabled. When I tried *Armored Core*



LEGS FOR DAYS

How each AC leg type affects your build

BIPEDAL

Vanilla, but the easiest to control. Lots of light and heavy options.

REVERSE

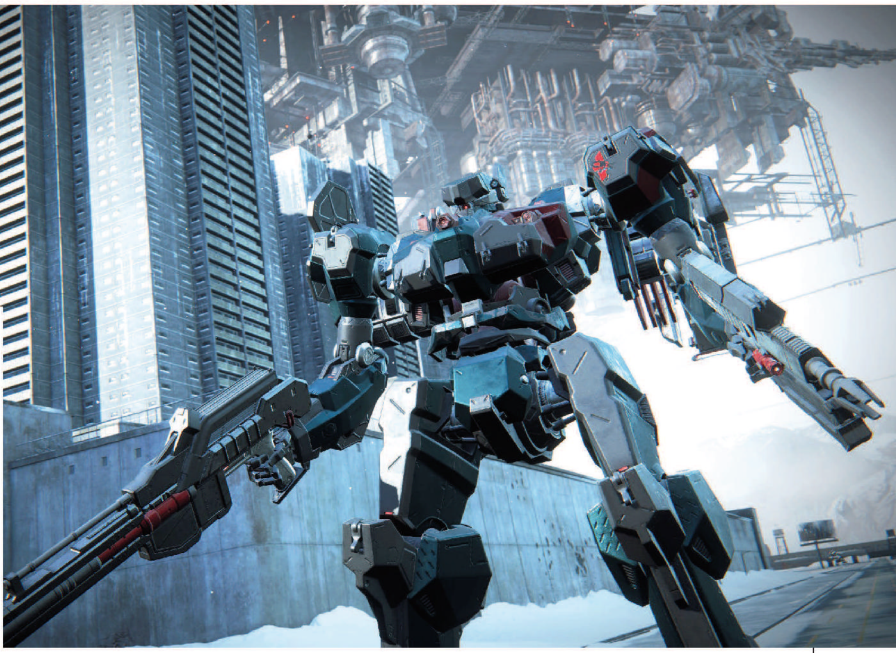
Reverse-joint ACs hop around like crickets. Best at vertical boosting.

TETRAPODS

Tetrapods can hover for long periods and absorb heavy weapon recoil.

TANKS

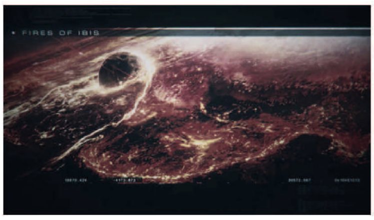
Tanks offer armour and can snap-turn on the ground when boosting.

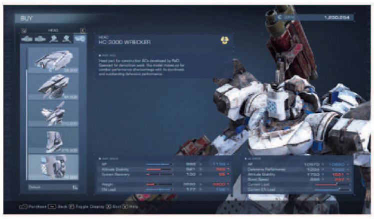


Bipedal mechs are plentiful and are the easiest to control.

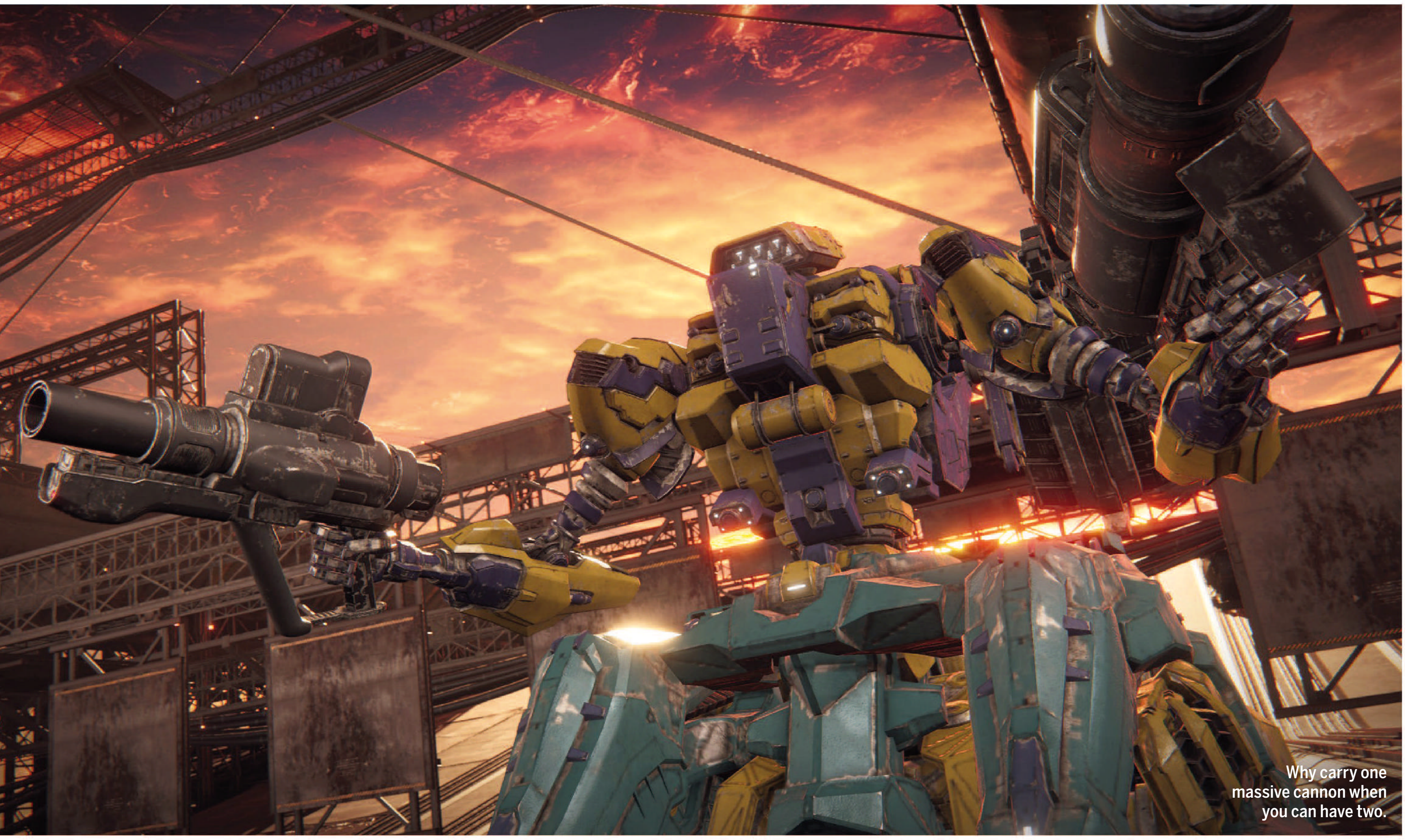
FAR LEFT: Different mech types offer different boosts.

LEFT: Select your mission and then customise your mech.

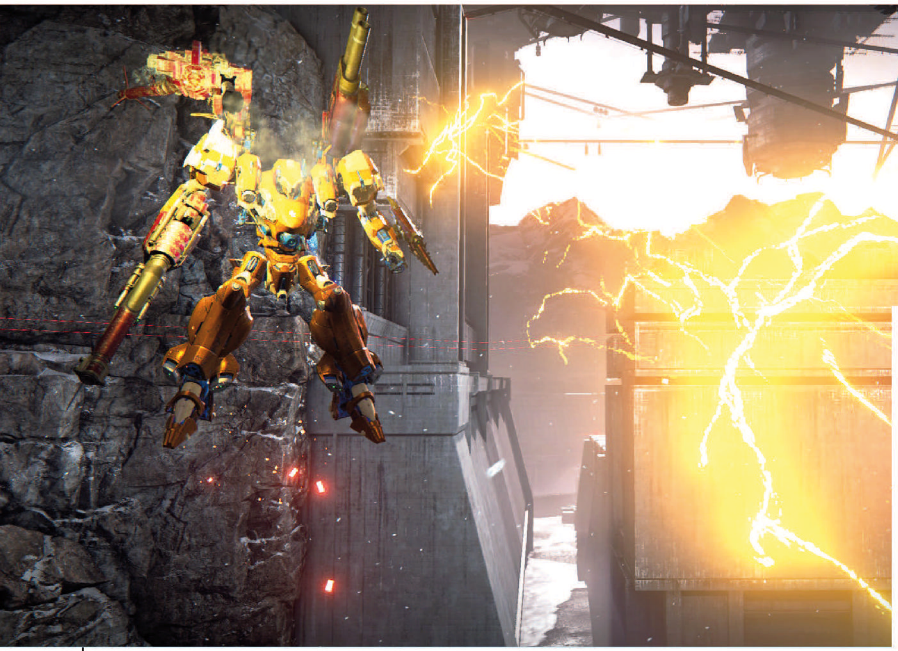

FIRES OF IBIS


BUY
HEAD
1,230,254
HEAD
HC-3000 WRECKER
Purchase Back Toggle Display Sort Help

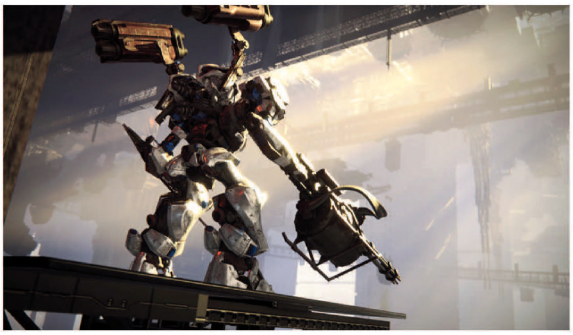
Head part for construction ACs developed by RaD. Specced for demolition work, this model makes up for combat performance shortcomings with its sturdiness and outstanding defensive performance.



Why carry one massive cannon when you can have two.

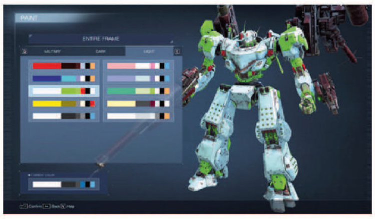


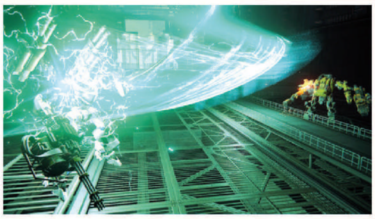
Killing blows are enjoyed in glorious slow-mo.

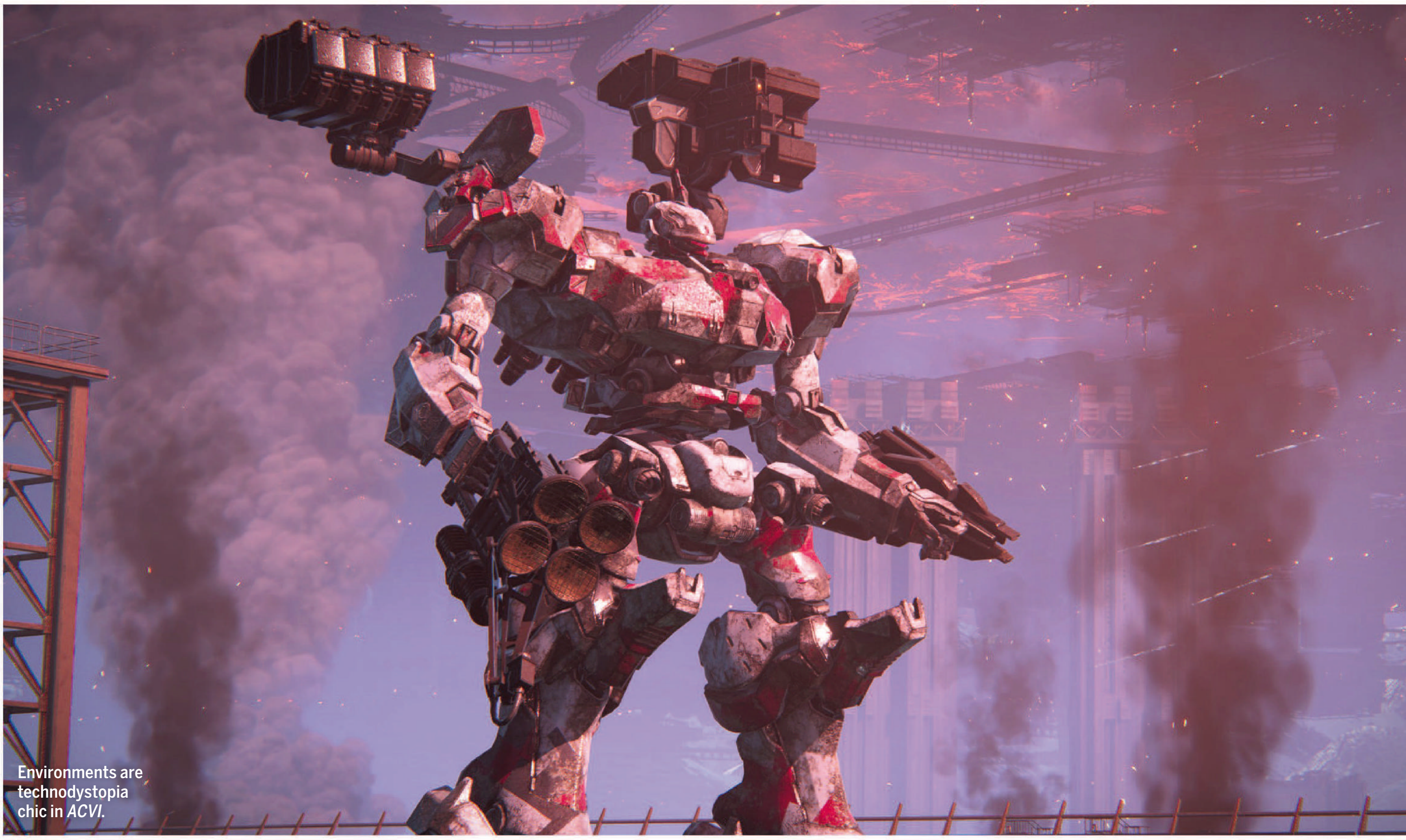


RIGHT: Neatly, you can paint your mech as you see fit.

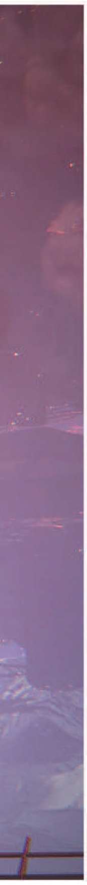
FAR RIGHT: The technicolour bombast of mecha combat.







Environments are technodystopia chic in *ACVI*.



VI on the Steam Deck I got 40-60fps by turning all the settings down to low. Certainly playable, but I was immediately mourning the loss of that crisp image I got on my 1440p monitor, and how much of the immaculate presentation I was missing on the small screen.

There should be a line in the credits for the designer who dialed in the way the killing blow in every mission triggers a slow motion explosion, stretching that instant into ten seconds of glory. It's the most important decision anyone made in the course of designing this game.

Purists need not despair over FromSoftware going soft

I don't mean that as a joke: after a decade of making games about overcoming immense adversity, in *Armored Core VI* FromSoftware has made one in which you're an apex predator. Though you acquire more powerful weapons and other upgrades, from the beginning I felt incredibly capable: tapping the quick boost button to dodge incoming missiles, clicking a gamepad stick to rocket forward into a full thrust 'assault boost' that added extra impact to my melee attacks.

Lenient checkpoints let you tackle almost every tough battle with replenished ammo and healing items without retreading progress up to that point in the mission. When continuing you can also swap out any AC parts already in your garage. It's a savvy structure that encourages lots of experimentation.

POWERED UP

Purists need not despair over FromSoftware going soft: you can still replay missions and pursue S Ranks by winning without restarting or taking advantage of a resupply. And this is still a damn hard videogame in spots, with one boss near the end that took me three hours and dozens of tries to overcome. It was the only moment that struck me as a pure 'git gud' skill check, where experimenting with different builds and strategies felt completely futile. At least for me, that boss was an overtuned aberration alongside so many others that were tough, but better balanced FromSoftware's usual demand for reflexes with a puzzley invitation to tinker my way to exactly the right mech for the job.

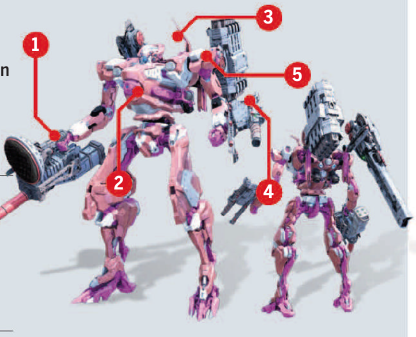
While *Armored Core VI*'s assembly menu offers stats on each part, while retrying duels against the elite ACs that could fly circles around me I did wish for more detailed feedback on how swapping one targeting module for another would affect my crosshair's accuracy, or how much faster my boost gauge would recharge if I built a mech with a lighter energy draw. Exposing the minutia of these systems in something resembling *Street Fighter 6*'s training mode would allow for fine-tuning.

Across 25 hours with *Armored Core VI*, my only other disappointment came from the environments, which are stunning snapshots of a crumbling technodystopia that offer no interactivity beyond a few hidden chests and wrecked mechs with tiny scraps of lore. On the whole *Armored Core VI*'s lean, focused nature is a great strength, but there's so much atmosphere in the world's visual design that it ends up underutilised. The voice in my ear as you fight could easily have chimed in more often as I explored nooks and crannies; some of the larger stages offer time and space to poke around, but practically nothing to find.

It's a missed opportunity in a game that's heavier on explicit story than FromSoftware's RPGs.

AC ANATOMY ANNOTATED

Use this cheat sheet to ace your Armored Core *anatomy test*



1 HANDS The pulse gun (AC's right) and stun baton (left) are short-range, but ideal for punching through shields.

2 CORE The core affects generator efficiency and how quickly you can be staggered.

3 HEAD The head determines how quickly you recover from a staggered state.

4 ARMS Arms affect your weapon tracking and weapon weight limitations.

5 SHOULDERS The laser cannon (AC's right) and missile launcher (left) offer long-range damage.

THAT'S SO RAVEN

There's more in-your-face narrative here than in all three *Dark Souls* games combined, as Rubicon's corporate mercenary squads regularly send you voice messages after each sortie to chit-chat about the aftermath of whatever you've just blown up. The option to replay missions makes it easy to ignore in favour of your own stories: could you grasshopper-leap your way to an objective with a mech built for verticality, leaving the ground defences left in your dust? Could the thick cloud of drones taking annoying potshots at you in another mission be wiped out in a single volley of multi-lock missiles?

There's a slight 'we saved money by not animating any of this' feel to the story playing out in voiceover monologues, but that also means the cutscenes are potent, like an IV drip of mecha fan service. They only mash that button so many times, but each time it feeds back into that core guiding principle: mechs are cool.

As in classic *Armored Core*, I love how ruthlessly *VI* keeps its tone. Pilots do not have lives outside their machines. You will never see a human being. Every alliance is temporary, as the corporations competing for Rubicon's resources will hire you to backstab the pilots you just fought alongside. The narrative branches at a few points based on which missions you choose to take and who you choose to kill – with an insidiously brilliant knife twist that the story path I think most people will want to go down presents some much harder battles, with an easier option there to taunt you. Nothing sells corporate dystopia better than screwing over those who've stuck their necks out for you.

After hours of building up a kinship with those voices I heard over the comms, I felt bad about shooting them down. But not, like, bad bad, because I was just there to do a job. I was there to get paid, to build a better mech, so I could do it all again better, faster, and cooler. This is *Armored Core*. We are blessed to have it back. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

The coolest mechs in gaming history form the core of an intense, focused action game in *Armored Core VI*.

87

WIRED GAMING MICE

Shave weight for the ultimate flick shots with these wired gaming mice

By Jacob Ridley

Wired gaming mice haven't gone anywhere despite plenty of competition from their wire-free counterparts. By keeping a cable around it's possible to shave the maximum amount of weight from a mouse for rapid reactions and fast flick shots. There's also the added benefit of never having your mouse die partway through a match of *Valorant*.

If an ultra lightweight gaming mouse sounds like something you'd be interested in, for this issue of PC PowerPlay I've put some of today's hottest contenders against one another to see how they fare. There are some of our favourites in the mix, including the DeathAdder from Razer and Logitech's excellent G502, but also some cheaper options like Corsair's Sabre Pro. In this pile of tethered rodents there's sure to be a good fit for your desktop and budget.

1
PC PowerPlay
EDITOR'S CHOICE

3
PC PowerPlay
SMART BUY

DeathAdder V3

RAZER **$99**

Unbeatable speed

1 The DeathAdder has been a firm favourite of ours since its inception. The second version of this Since then it's been tweaked to make it lighter, faster, and more comfortable, culminating in the slightly absurd DeathAdder V3 before us today.

The DeathAdder offers a Razer Focus Pro sensor capable of up to 30,000 DPI. That's definitely an absurd trait even in the world of 4K monitors. Paired with that is the 8KHz 'HyperPolling Technology', which means this mouse sends its positional data to a PC more often than most. Most importantly, however, it tracks wonderfully across the mouse mat. While resolutely a right-handed mouse, the DeathAdder has a moderately sized hump into a gentle slope down the left and right mouse buttons. It's the DeathAdder's excellent ergonomics that makes up most of its fundamental appeal. It absolutely bears mentioning that you can find a simple wired mouse for a lot less cash, but if you want the pinnacle for competitive gaming then the DeathAdder V3 is it.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Immensely quick
- → Lovely ergonomics
- → Expensive

SPECS BUTTONS: 6 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED / **DPI:** 30,000 / **WEIGHT:** 59G / **LIGHTING:** NONE

G502 X

LOGITECH **$79**

Ergonomic superiority

2 The Logitech G502 is yet another top pick among PC PowerPlay's staff. The latest version is the G502 X, which shaves some weight and improves on an already excellent shape, puts it right back into contention for 2023. While a little heavier than the Razer DeathAdder, the G502 X is hardly heavyweight at 89g. Not long ago that'd be considered an especially lightweight mouse, and the G502 X is a dream to throw around in games for it.

While weight has been saved on this model, it still retains the infinite scroll wheel we love so much, albeit a plastic version, which doesn't feel as good.

The shape of the G502 X is its strongest feature. It retains the supremely comfortable design intended solely for right-handed mouse users we've come to expect, but the new interchangeable thumb button makes for easy adjustment to keep it bang-on the best spot for rapid-fire.

Logitech mice have earned a reputation for quality that lasts many years, and this one feels as good as the best.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Impeccable ergonomics
- → Interchangeable thumb buttons
- → Feels like quality

SPECS BUTTONS: 11 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED / **DPI:** 25,600 / **WEIGHT:** 89G / **LIGHTING:** NONE

4
THE AEROX 5 WEIGHS
JUST 66 GRAMS
GROUP TEST

Sabre Pro Champion Series

CORSAIR **$79**

Barebones

3 If you're looking for, one, a cheaper mouse, or two, a back to basics mouse, the Corsair Sabre Pro is it. It has the innards of a high-end competitive gaming mouse stuffed into a rather bland, simple shell to save weight and cost. For FPS gamers, then, it's what you need and nothing more.

The headline feature of this mouse is the 'Axon Hyper-Processing', which much like Razer's HyperPolling, delivers a 8,000Hz polling rate for snappier reporting between the mouse and connected PC. The rest of the sensor's spec list is also superb for the price, rated at 18,000 DPI and sharing many characteristics of pricier rodents. The shell of the Corsair is pretty barebones. It's simply black plastic with not an RGB LED in sight. It's a fairly claw-grip friendly shape, though it's not the worst for palm grip gamers. Either way it's a pretty standard, zero-fuss shell and not the comfiest for longer sessions. This mouse is absolutely the functional pick of the lot, and as one of the most affordable, too, that places it high in my gaming mice recommendations list.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Just the essentials
- → Perfect for FPS gamers
- → Not the comfiest

SPECS **BUTTONS:** 6 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED / **DPI:** 18,000 / **WEIGHT:** 69G / **LIGHTING:** NONE

Aerox 5

STEELSERIES **$129**

Light and fancy

4 SteelSeries has taken one of its leading mice, shaved it down to 66g, and still managed to stuff it full of lovely RGB lighting. This is definitely the best-looking lightweight wired mouse tested, although only if you don't mind its holey shell.

The Aerox's looks are a bit love-it or hate-it, and I personally fall into the camp of preferring a hard-shell mouse. If you don't mind, however, there's a lot more to like about the Aerox 5. For one, it's loaded with thumb buttons and they're mostly within easy access. There are five buttons in total on the side, a few easier to access than others. The mouse's shell also looks and feels extremely well made. The Aerox 5's sensor doesn't quite match the DeathAdder, however, at 18,000 DPI you're unlikely to need anything higher even at 4K. The important thing is it's very responsive, as you would expect to see on a big brand mouse with a premium price point. Ultimately, this feels like the pick for anyone concerned with their desktop's style, whereas other gaming mice picks are cheaper, lighter, or comfier.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Lots of thumb buttons
- → RGB lighting
- → Perforated shell

SPECS **BUTTONS:** 9 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED / **DPI:** 18,000 / **WEIGHT:** 66G / **LIGHTING:** RGB REAR ZONE

BOUNTIFUL RGB LIGHTING TO GLORIOUS EFFECT

DO I NEED A MOUSE CAPABLE OF 30,000 DPI?

The truth is, you don't need to go chasing bigger and bigger DPI digits just to game. What really matters is how you like to game and what resolution you're gaming at. DPI, or more accurately CPI, is a measure of how many times a mouse checks the surface it's gliding over.

The lower the DPI, the further you have to move the mouse on your mat to move the cursor on screen. While higher DPIs are handy for screens with higher pixel counts, such as 4K. Even then we're talking under 10,000 DPI for most, otherwise you might find the cursor starts flying off all directions for the smallest of mouse movements. Some gamers like a twitchy response for rapid 360° no-scopes, and that's why it's good to have options, but generally we all get by for gaming with DPI settings in the low ranges, around 200-3000.

Kone XP

ROCCAT **$109**

Light it up

5 In a world of lightweight wired gaming mice, the Roccat Kone XP stands out for its 104g weight. That's actually not that heavy in the grand scheme of things, but considering the 59g mouse in this test it's practically a welterweight class device. Not to worry, however, it makes up for that weight with bountiful RGB lighting to glorious effect.

Its weight is not a massive detriment to the Kone XP. Some of that can be attributed to the wealth of buttons lining the side of this mouse. Most within easy reach of your mitts while gaming with it. Roccat also offers Easy-Shift here, which is the company's way of saying it has a shift key built-in for doubled finger functionality.

Though it must be said if you're looking at this mouse, you're probably doing so with an eye for making your desktop look good. This mouse is loaded with RGB lights, and its translucent plastic shell is clear enough to let these shine through all the way to the tips of the main buttons. For looks, then, this is probably the way to go, so long as you don't care for the added weight.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → RGB everywhere
- → Lots of buttons
- → Heavier than most

SPECS BUTTONS: 15 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED / **DPI:** 19,000 / **WEIGHT:** 104G / **LIGHTING:** RGB ZONES

Lift

NZXT **$49**

Tough sell

6 The NZXT Lift is a mouse we've had around the PCPP office for a while. We've not talked about it much, and mostly that's because it's a pretty standard device by most metrics. Beyond a few fun colour combos, it feels relatively run-of-the-mill in a competitive field.

The one standout thing about it is the RGB placement, which has been cleverly fitted around the front base of the mouse. It's clever because, unlike most mice which load RGB lighting right where your palm rests when using the mouse, you can actually see the NZXT's when using it.

Beyond that, there are a few simple thumb buttons, a knobbled scroll wheel, and a fairly standard design. It's not that the NZXT does much wrong so much as it's just not as technically competent as a simple mouse like the Corsair Sabre, and it's not as lightweight or flashy as those more expensive we've tested. It's another simple FPS-style mouse with a touch of flair, and it comes in a few neat colours, but I think I'd go with a few other options before buying this one.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Clever RGB placement
- → Lightweight
- → Doesn't stand out

SPECS BUTTONS: 6 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED / **DPI:** 16,000 / **WEIGHT:** 67G / **LIGHTING:** RGB ZONES

GROUP TEST

WIRELESS GAMING MICE

I challenge you to spot the difference between these wireless rodents and their wired counterparts. *By Jacob Ridley*

DPI
ROCCAT
BURST

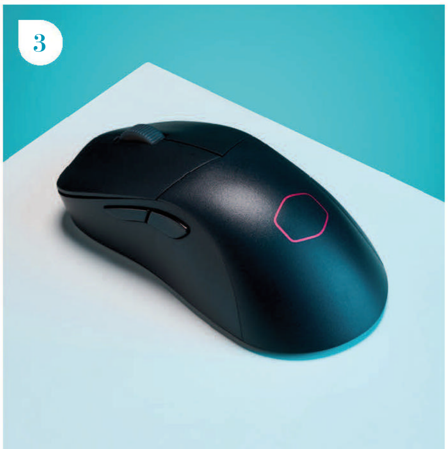
SUPERLIGHT

Wireless technology has come a long way in a short period of time. Slipstream, HyperSpeed, Lightspeed, Stellar, Quantum – call it what you like, but you can pretty much consider a stable and robust connection as a given with any wireless gaming mouse from a renowned manufacturer. With that covered, you're free to focus on finding a mouse that suits your needs elsewhere.

Comfort is a key consideration. A top-quality mouse will contour to the hand and put every thumb switch within easy reach, even if there's ten of them. Then there's the sensor itself, the actual hardware translating your real-world movements to accurate actions in-game. If you're particularly aggressive with your mouse movements, only some mice have the acceleration ratings to keep up.

1
ROCCAT
BURST

2
PC PowerPlay
POWER AWARD



Burst Pro Air

ROCCAT **$169**

Love it or hate it

1 The Roccat Burst Pro Air has a love it or hate it design. It doesn't actually have the honeycomb shell so often associated with lightweight gaming mice, but it looks like it does. I'm in the hate-it camp, personally. Though I will admit it is something to behold with the four RGB lighting zones turned all the way up. At 81g, Roccat hasn't packed on too much weight for its zealous lighting style. If you're chasing pure performance, you'll want to look elsewhere, but the Burst Pro Air is still on the lighter end of the spectrum for wireless mice. The battery life is decent for that weight, rated up to 100 hours if you're clever with the power saving.

On a functional level, the Burst Pro Air offers a good 19K sensor and plenty of connectivity options, including both 2.4G with the dongle and Bluetooth. There are faster mice on the market, and lighter ones, but if you're a show-off then there's no denying the Burst Pro Air is a real statement piece for the desktop.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → RGB everywhere
- → Light and bright
- → Cheaper than you'd think

SPECS BUTTONS: 7 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED / **DPI:** 19,000 / **WEIGHT:** 81G / **LIGHTING:** FOUR-ZONE RGB

Deathadder V3 Pro

RAZER **$259**

The legend continues

2 The Deathadder is a PC gaming great. The V3 Pro is no less deserving of that title, either. For this new and improved version, Razer has taken the Deathadder to the gym, shaving off precious pounds and turning it into 'a lean, mean, clicking machine' to quote my colleague Kizzy.

This really is stupendously light for a wireless mouse. It weighs in at just 63g, which is as light as most competitive rodents, if not lighter than many others in this test. The benefit of this is you don't have to put in much effort to throw this mouse around; it glides over the surface like Mickey Mouse on ice. In case you get a little too enthusiastic with your flick shots, an exterior coating helps keep the mouse in your hands. The Focus Pro sensor inside the V3 Pro doubles down on its competitive credentials. It's arguably a bit overkill at up to 30,000 DPI but I'll give it a pass for its excellent acceleration and tracking performance. A 90-hour battery rounds off what is a spectacularly adept gaming mouse.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Extremely light
- → Accurate tracking
- → Good battery life

SPECS BUTTONS: 5 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED / **DPI:** 30,000 / **WEIGHT:** 63G / **LIGHTING:** NONE

4
PC PowerPlay
EDITOR'S CHOICE

WHEN I HAVE NO NEW GAMING MOUSE TO TEST, I REACH FOR THE SUPERLIGHT

MM731

COOLER MASTER **$89**

Budget enough

3 Here's a gaming mouse I've had around for over a year now. When I first tested it back at the start of 2022, I thought it was a decent lightweight gaming mouse but one that was ultimately overpriced for what it offered. So why bring bother to retest in 2023? It's half the price it once was. You can pick up the MM731 for a lot less than its original asking price today. It's a lot better off against some other cheaper wireless mice today than trying to rub shoulders with often more impressive Razer or Logitech options. With a lower price tag, it's easier to look past the MM731's lacking software or slightly off thumb button placement.

On the plus side, the MM731 is outrageously light. It's featherweight at just 58 grams. To be a little unfair to it, the weightlessness combined with the plastic finish make it look and feel cheap, but there are a lot of other mice that make the same sacrifices for weight savings. At least the MM731 is actually cheap.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Price drop
- → Extremely light
- → Feels cheap

SPECS BUTTONS: 6 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED / **DPI:** 19,000 / **WEIGHT:** 59G / **LIGHTING:** REAR RGB LEDS

G Pro Wireless Superlight

LOGITECH **$279**

Still the boss

4 I test a lot of gaming mice. The best way I know of to give a mouse a fair review is to use it extensively for gaming and during work hours. That means I'm usually on a steady rotation of peripherals throughout a year. That said, when I have no new gaming mouse to test, I reach for the Superlight. I've become accustomed to the Superlight: the subtle shape of it, the way the scroll wheel feels, and the snappy thumb buttons in prime location for my grip. It barely weighs a thing, coming in at 63g, and that helps it glide across my mouse mat with ease.

It's a very stripped back mouse by today's standards. The chassis is a bit slippery and there's not even a DPI switch on it. You could make a case for newer mice, and the fact this mouse feels basic for its weight class just goes to show how far mice have come in a couple years. But I liked the Superlight a lot when I first reviewed it and I've used it ever since. That says a lot. It's also a whole lot cheaper than it used to be.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → Ergonomic shape
- → Just the basics
- → Bit slippery

SPECS BUTTONS: 5 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED / **DPI:** 25,600 / **WEIGHT:** 63G / **LIGHTING:** NONE

THE AEROX 9 IS AN MMO-FRIENDLY MOUSE MEANING IT'S ABSOLUTELY LOADED WITH THUMB BUTTONS

HOW WE TEST GAMING MICE

First and foremost when testing a gaming mouse is putting in plenty of time to play with it. There's really no better way to get a grip on what a mouse offers than experiencing it first-hand and for long enough to get accustomed it. We've used every mouse we recommend for many hours, over the course of many weeks.

To get the hard data to back up our anecdotal reports, we use an application called MouseTester. This is a simple yet useful app that plots data points across various graphs to show how a sensor performs. It shows if the sensor is jittery, inaccurate, or can't keep up with fast acceleration. Ultimately, very few mice we test ever fall flat in MouseTester these days – the quality of sensors has really improved a lot over the past decade.

Aerox 9 Wireless

STEELSERIES **$229**

Hotkey heaven

5 SteelSeries has a handful of impressive wireless mice, such as the Aerox 5 Wireless and this, the Aerox 9 Wireless. They're pretty similar rodents, though the Aerox 9 is an MMO-friendly mouse meaning it's absolutely loaded with thumb buttons. Ten of them. Is it too many thumb buttons? It's a bit of a memory game to get to grips with at first. I set up hotkeys for *Destiny 2* and *Diablo IV*, then succinctly forgot the lot when actually playing the game and went back to my keyboard. With time, I've come to use a vertical row or two, depending on the game, but I'm yet to find a way to get all ten into my muscle memory. I do like the look and feel of the Aerox 9. It's a honeycomb design, which I'm usually on the fence about, but SteelSeries makes it work in this case. It's comfy over long periods, and while I have struggled with slow wake times in the past, I made a change to the sleep options in the Engine app and it's been fine ever since. Ultimately, I'd be happy with this mouse as a big time MMO player.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

→ Ten thumb buttons
→ Great for MMO gamers
→ Muscle memory takes time

SPECS BUTTONS: 14 / **ERGONOMIC:** RIGHT-HANDED / **DPI:** 18,000 / **WEIGHT:** 89G
LIGHTING: UNDERSIDE RGB LEDS

Makalu Max

MOUNTAIN **$TBA**

More mighty

6 Prior to the Mountain Makalu, I've been using the company's first gaming mouse, the Mountain 67, as my go-to in the office. In all honesty, I never got along well with the location of the large central DPI switch, often accidentally knocking due to my admittedly weird mouse grip.The Makalu Max does keep things roughly the same in that regard, but a lot of improvements have been made elsewhere. For one, it's wireless. Though only 2.4G via a dongle. There's no Bluetooth connectivity here, which is not the end of days, but might knock it off a few peoples' lists. It also comes with interchangeable weights to help you get the balance of the mouse just right. But buyer beware, it is a heavy mouse already at 110g. This mouse does suffer from a slow wake up time, which makes it frustrating to use day-to-day. You really want your wireless mouse to be instantly awake when you shuffle it about, and the Makalu Max takes a little too long for my liking. That keeps it from making it into our top picks right now.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

→ Heavier mouse
→ Interchangeable weights
→ Slow wake

SPECS BUTTONS: 8 / **ERGONOMIC:** AMBIDEXTROUS / **DPI:** 19,000 / **WEIGHT:** 110G
LIGHTING: SCROLL WHEEL RGB LEDS

MSI Stealth 16 Mercedes-AMG Motorsport A13V

MSI hopes to outpace the competition with this Mercedes branded ultra-portable gaming/ studio laptop.

MSI has partnered with car company Mercedes AMG on a customised Stealth 16 Studio A13V laptop dubbed the Stealth 16 Mercedes-AMG Motorsport A13V. The Stealth 16 Studio range is technically pitched at creative professionals since it comes with studio drivers and Windows 11 Pro, but it's a blurry line at best since MSI offers some models with 240Hz monitors that you'd really only use if you were buying a laptop primarily (or at least partially) for gaming.

Mercedes AMG is actually a good partner on this front since the consumer cars offer a premium elegance that line up with the work side of the Stealth 16 pitch, but the company's F1 participation means it's also capable of talking about gaming performance.The Stealth 16 is available in a range of configurations, with various processors, RAM and storage options all starting at $3,3499 on sale. The Stealth 16 Mercedes AMG A13V sits at the other end of the spectrum as the most expensive Stealth 16 offering with an RRP of $5,499.

Official Partner
msi
AMG MOTORSPORT
DYNAUDIO

For this you get a 16-inch 4K 60Hz OLED screen, Intel Core i9-13900H CPU and a 105W Nvidia GeForce RTX 4070 GPU, which adds up to a pretty powerful system that's capable of impressive creative performance. The CPU isn't the most powerful we've seen, outpaced by Intel's unlocked 13th gen i9 and i7 processors (which have more performance cores) and AMD's Ryzen 9 7940HS, but it is still very competent and will be capable of handling demanding workloads. The same could be said about the 105W RTX 4070, which is outperformed by systems willing to divert additional power to the graphical capabilities, but which still offers respectable frame rates of around 100 fps on modern titles using 1080p settings.

The device's conservative power draw does help in overall battery life. The system lasts almost a full work day (7 hours and 8 minutes) in light work tasks. This does drop to 6 hours and 36 minutes when engaging the abundance of pixels on the OLED panel for 1080p movie playback, but the 99.9Wh battery can not be any bigger thanks to flight restrictions. So the only way you'll get a longer lasting laptop is to ditch performance, features or convert to a MacBook Pro.

All this fits into a sleek sub 2cm thick laptop that's covered in a premium metal chassis and which is highly portable at 1.88kg. If portability is your primary concern and power and price are secondary to that then the Stealth 16 Mercedes-AMG Motorsport A13V makes sense, but for an extra 2mm of thickness and 200g of weight you can get an Asus ROG Zephyrus M16 with similar specs for around $1,200 less. Yes that will include a solid battery life hit, but it's food for thought for anyone who doesn't mind carrying around a power brick.

Joel Burgess

VERDICT
8

MSI Stealth 16 Mercedes-AMG

✚ VERDICT A powerful and premium ultrabook with a 4K display and an impressive battery life.

$5,499 , au.msi.com/Laptops

	PCMark 10 - Overall (score)	Cinebench R23 - CPU (Score)	PCMark 10 - Battery Work (HH:MM)	3DMark Time Spy (score)	F1 2021 - 1080p Ultra (fps Av.)	Cyberpunk 2077 - QHD Ultra RT	CrystalDiskMark Read(MB/s)	CrystalDiskMark Write (MB/s)
MSI Stealth 16 Studio A13VG	7,083	19,287	7h8min	11,709	129	29	6,473	4,707
2023 Asus ROG Zephyrus M16	6,996	19,903	4h11min	14,341	161	29	7,102	5,279

SPECS W11 PRO; 16-INCH OLED DISPLAY AT 3840 BY 2400 PIXEL RESOLUTION, VESA DISPLAYHDR 600; 100% DCI-P3; INTEL CORE I9-13900H CPU; NVIDIA GEFORCE RTX 4070 (105W) GPU; 32GB RAM; 2TB SSD; 99.9 WH BATTERY (6H 36MIN 1080P BATTERY LIFESPAN); 35.6 X 26 X 2CM; 1.88KG.

Corsair HS80 Max Wireless

Revised mid-tier headset from Corsair has plenty of features in its arsenal

The HS80 Max is a headset that doesn't just lead with its audio quality but has a plethora of tricks up its sleeve. The previous iteration of the HS80 was a great all-rounder and had a rich warm soundstage, a comfortable headband, and a clean aesthetic. The HS80 Max is a revised version of the previous model that aims to further these points.

Other than a little more clamping force than we would like, the comfort here is spot on, just like on the previous headset. It features the same ski-band style suspended headband made of a soft fabric. You can adjust this to alter the size of the headset, unlike the traditional method where you pull down on either cup. Soft cushy earpads round off the overall comfort of the headset allowing hours of wear without issue. Weighing in at 0.77lbs, it's not the lightest headset we've experienced, but it's light enough.

The HS80's physical controls are pretty minimal. There's a power button and volume wheel behind the left earcup, while a Bluetooth button sits behind the right. The microphone is controlled by lifting it up to mute or down to use. One hidden and cool feature for PC users is that when the volume wheel is pressed, it opens up the Corsair iCue app. Here, you can access EQ settings, lighting options, and other general operations.

But how about the sound quality? If there's one thing the Corsair HS80 Max is not, it's neutral. It has a boost in the low-mids with the highs slightly rolled for a sound that can be described as warm. Now, we're not saying this is a bad-sounding headset. In fact, it sounds good. But the flip side is it loses a lot of detail for something in this price bracket. To help further with immersive gaming, this headset supports Dolby Atmos which is accessible via the Dolby Access app. Although verging on subtle it does give a little more three-dimensional space to game audio without washing it out the way some spatial audio can.

The HS80 Max steps up a gear when it comes to features. The ability to map the scroll wheel button to a whole set of functions in iCue is one of them. Another is that it supports both 2.4GHz and Bluetooth connectivity so you can connect it to many different platforms, though sadly it doesn't have multipoint connectivity. There's a ten-band EQ, which is much more powerful than in a lot of companion apps, along with some EQ presets. There's also a way to create a personalised EQ or sound profile via the Sonarworks SoundID personalization giving you more control to get the exact sound you need. One final positive point to mention is the 65 hour battery life.

At $280, it's the epitome of mid-range. Yet it isn't as good a deal as the Corsair HS65 Surround. Having spent some time with the HS80 Max, we'd say that the price tag offers an appropriate amount of performance, comfort, and features.

James Holland

VERDICT **8**

Corsair HS80 Max Wireless

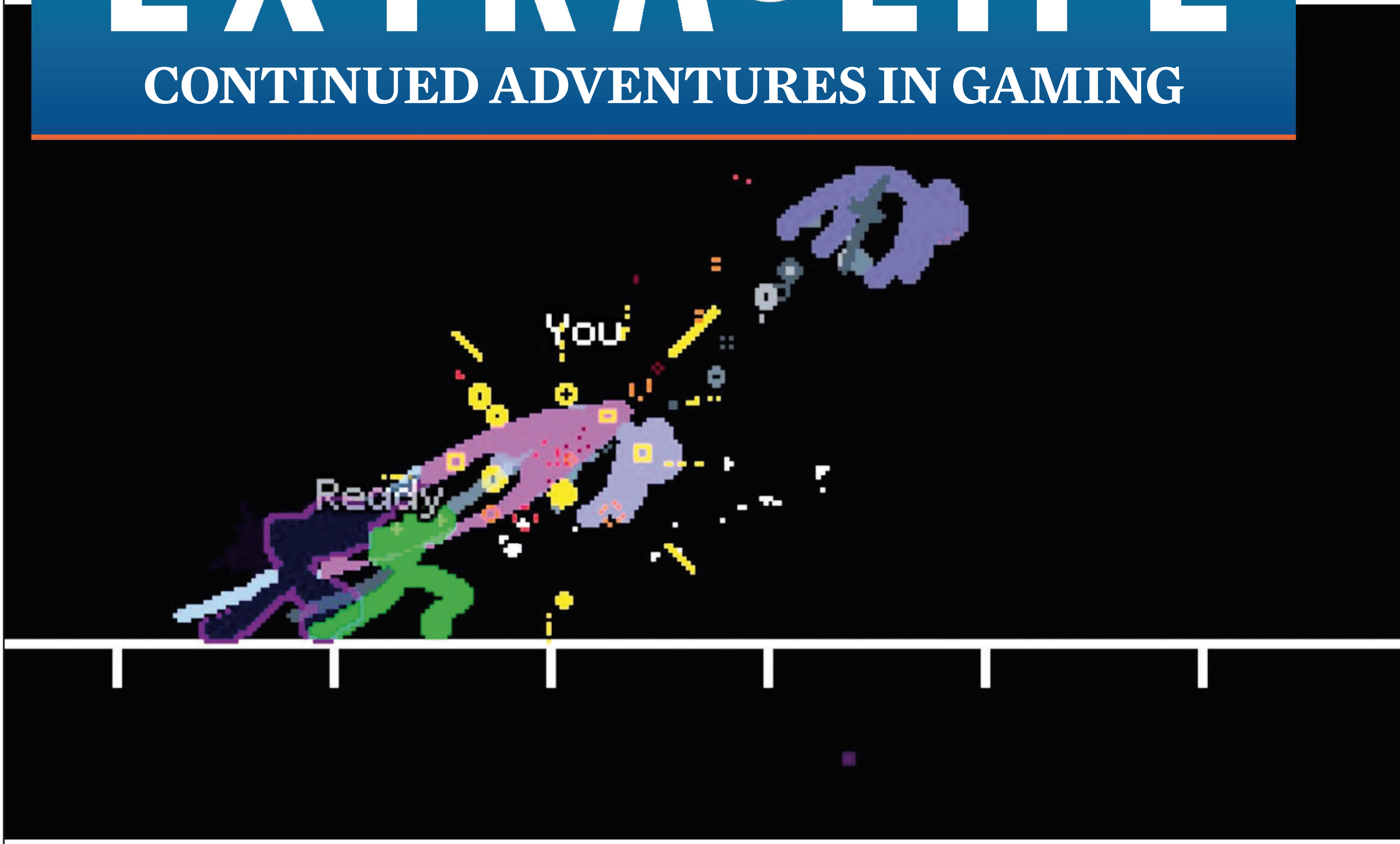
+ VERDICT Feature-rich and a comfortable fit, long battery life with RGB. Warm, clean sound.

$279, corsair.com

SPECS **DRIVER TYPE:** 50MM NEODYMIUM DRIVER / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20HZ - 40,000HZ / **IMPEDANCE:** 32 OHMS / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB-C, BLUETOOTH, WIRELESS 2.4GHZ / **COMPATIBILITY:** PC, MAC, PS4 & PS5; BATTERY LIFE: UP TO 65 HOURS W/O RGB / **DESIGN STYLE:** CLOSED-BACK

EXTRA + LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



"My main's the Cowboy, and my favourite gambit is Impale"

YOUR ONLY MOVE IS HUSTLE doesn't hate you for taking time off

I'm not good at fighting games. I have a cursed combination of great reflexes and god-awful fine motor control. This makes the Dragon Punch motion catastrophically hard in my sweaty hands. If I want to learn a combo, I have to plug in hours in training mode until it's deep in the muscle, leaving me with sore thumbs and a headache.

Despite all this, I actually did get into a typical fighting game, once. I had a brief love affair with *Guilty Gear: Strive* back in 2021, finding a decent handle on the characters Giovanna and Axl Low, I had a good time.

But I hit a wall: fighting games are really hard to come back to. All those hours in training mode faded with the passage of time, forcing me to scale that terrible execution barrier anew after every sabbatical – just to be able to play. So, I just stopped.

HARVEY RANDALL

THIS MONTH
Discovering new mix-ups *Your Only Move is Hustle.*

ALSO PLAYED
Starfield, Final Fantasy XIV, Remnant 2

Then came *Your Only Move Is Hustle* (which I'll shorten to *YOMI* going forward). It's a fighting game that was released last year, and I can play it even after long retreats from the genre. *YOMI* doesn't give a damn whether you can input a dragon punch or not – because it doesn't just lower the execution barrier, it demolishes it completely.

You see, *YOMI* is turn-based. It lets you just pick your next move from a long list of options, while displaying a preview of the result. You can also preview your opponent's moves, seeing what'll happen if they block, spot dodge, roll, or just slap you with a faster attack.

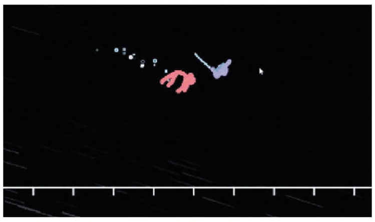
TOP: Combat is turn-based.

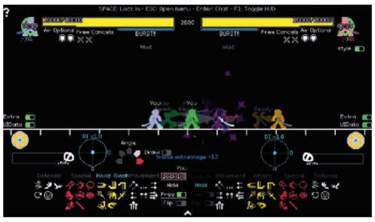
You have unfettered access to a library of knowledge and technical skill, one that'd usually take you years to achieve in something like *Strive*. *YOMI* lets you get right into the meat of what makes fighting games so much fun – reading your opponent.

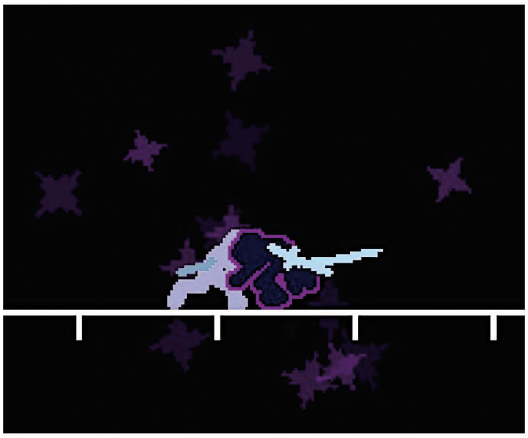
TELEPORTS BEHIND YOU

My main's the Cowboy, and my favourite gambit is Impale. It's a high-commitment, low-impact move that

IT LETS YOU JUST PICK YOUR NEXT MOVE FROM A LONG LIST OF OPTIONS





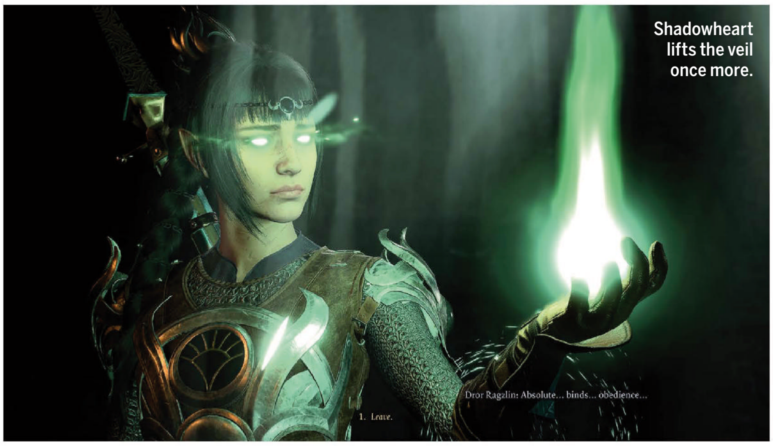


teleports you behind your foe. As an option, it kind of sucks. What's good about Impale, however, is that you can free cancel it. Free cancels are a limited resource that let you cancel into something else mid-animation. Of course, your opponent can see you've done this and react.

Free cancelling Impale often leads to a stand-off where you've teleported behind your enemy, commencing a staring contest that plays out like a game of rock paper scissors. They can try to block the Impale, but grab beats block – so they'll usually try to grab you back, setting you both back on even footing.

Upon my latest return to *YOMI*, I discovered a third option: dodging in place beats grab, side-stepping their attempted suplex and leaving them wide open. Then I discovered that if they simply choose to do nothing, I'm left wide open. Unless I choose to just let Impale play out – and so the cycle completes, and the serpent of hard reads devours its own tail.

Choosing the right option is immensely satisfying, and it's something experienced fighting game players know well. But in *YOMI*, you get to enjoy it right away, and it lets me pull off my favourite mix-ups just as reliably as when I left. ■



Shadowheart lifts the veil once more.

Dror Ragalin: Absolute... binds... obedience...

1. Leave.

"That the dead drow did know"

Raising the dead in BALDUR'S GATE III

ROBERT JONES

THIS MONTH
Got rejected by a tight-lipped corpse.

ALSO PLAYED
Starfield, Diablo IV, Icewind Dale

The drow raider lies mangled in a pool of his own blood, his limbs twisted and broken, the consequence of a bad end in a savage battle. Evidence as to why this drow, along with a pack of goblins, had attacked a coaching inn is sparse, and aside from the fact that a high-ranking official from the city of Baldur's Gate has been abducted from the inn, nothing else is known.

It's a good job, then, that my party of adventurers in *Baldur's Gate III* currently includes not just one but two clerics, masters of support magic, religious studies and, as this is the glorious world of DnD, rituals that allow them to commune with the dead. And, let me tell you, *Baldur's Gate III* is absolutely a game where you want to get chin-wagging with the recently deceased.

That's because, among the multitudinous awesome things this landmark RPG delivers, is the ability to talk to basically any corpse in the game, providing you have the means to do so of course, and the dead often have very revealing and helpful things to say. Things that help you complete quests, see into the past, and even cast a light into your own character's soul.

LIFTING THE VEIL

But what I love about how *Baldur's Gate III* handles this is that from the animation of the raised corpse itself, to the pained look on the raiser's face, through to the strict limits on how long the veil to the world of the dead can be prised open, raising the dead is a dramatic and disconcertingly unnatural event.

Shadowheart, my go-to cleric for this job, forcibly reanimates the corpse of the drow, lifting it from the earth, and commands it to speak. Shadowheart's sorrow-filled expression is countered by the lifeless glowing eyes of the drow, where it is asked why the official was targeted for abduction. But the dead drow never knew this, and remains deathly silent. But, as the torn opening to the realm of the dead begins to close, a second question is asked: where was the abducted official to be taken once captured? That the dead drow did know... to Moonrise Towers. It's time for my party to venture forth. ■

“Unlike a typical life or farm sim, I’m not tracking days or energy use”

PALIA is a cozy MMO where you’re not a hero

Cosiness and MMOs are my two main vices, so *Palia* feels like it’s being made specifically for me. I’ve got a bit of emotional investment in its success, I’ll admit, so I voluntarily played a good bit more of *Palia*’s alpha than I really needed to for work purposes.

In *Palia* you are not a hero. You’re one of many, many humans who’ve popped into the world after the local Majiri people believed you’d all gone extinct – a nice deviation from the usual MMO setup, which asks us to believe that the world is primarily populated by chosen ones. There’s no PvE or PvP combat, and your goal is to become a member of the village.

Unlike a typical life or farm sim, I’m not tracking days or energy use. I share a time of day with everyone on the server so there’s no sleeping until tomorrow or depleting energy. Instead, I play through the entire day and night cycle and cook myself meals to increase the experience I gain for activities. In my first week with the game that entailed fishing and crafting, clearing wood and rocks from my property to eventually replace my small tent with a wood house, visiting skill masters and doing quests for new recipes, and doing a spot of hunting with fellow PC PowerPlay writer Mollie Taylor.

LAUREN MORTON

THIS MONTH
Went fishing against my will.

ALSO PLAYED
Witch It

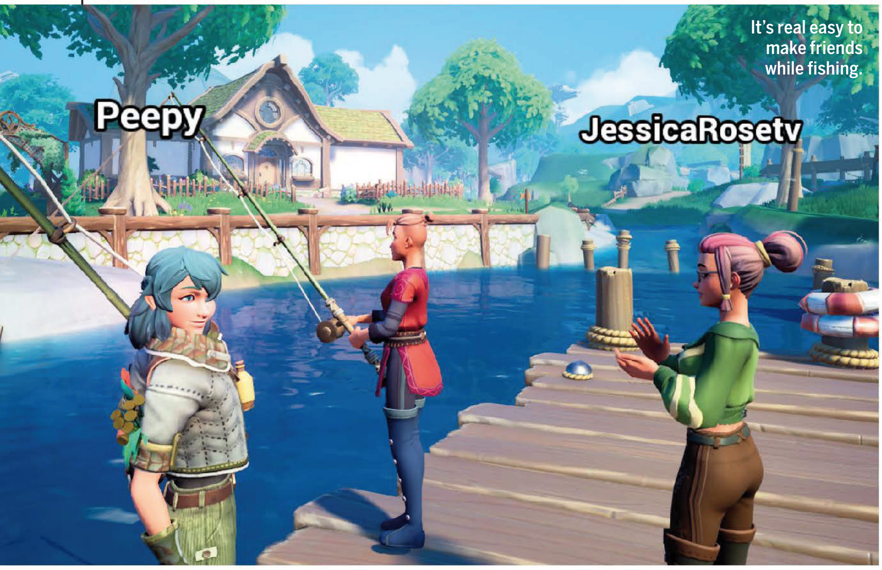
There is a main questline to pursue, which involves figuring out why you and all the other humans are appearing, and helps provide a sense of progress. The other goals I’ve got to chase are upgrading my tools, levelling-up my friendship with locals by bringing gifts, collection achievements, and adding new rooms and decor to my home.

CUSTOMISING MY PROPERTY IS ONE OF PALIA’S MOST PERMISSIVE SYSTEMS

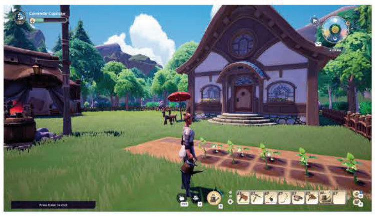
Customising my property is one of *Palia*’s most permissive systems, clearly the primary endgame, as it were. I can place furniture from my third-person perspective or from above and also snap to a grid or free placement. I can hang light fixtures from the rafters and place small clutter objects freely on shelves. I can even manage editing permissions for my lot to grant different friends access to touch my stuff.

After the open beta servers launched, I finally started having some more natural interactions with other players. I found myself in a couple fishing circles where a nearby player’s cheering emote can help others cinch a catch and flagged down helpers to cut glowing purple Flow Trees who regain durability as you chop and so are easier to tackle together. What I’m hoping *Palia* will consider in its future are shared open world events for players to all flock to on the map – a staple of games like *Guild Wars 2* and *Fallout 76* that make a world feel worth visiting.

Palia will be free-to-play with cosmetic transactions when it fully launches. For now, it’s in open beta where you can try it yourself. ■

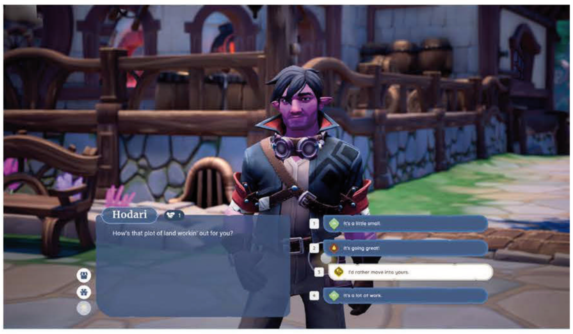


It’s real easy to make friends while fishing.



LEFT: Every cosy life starts with a small garden.

BELOW: *Palia* wants me to flirt with the local miner so badly.



Hodari
How’s that plot of land workin’ out for you?

1 It’s a little small.
2 It’s going great!
3 I’d rather move into yours.
4 It’s a lot of work.

“Five packs of Pokémon VMAX cards please.”

“I explore the rural village, scavenge for ammo and push past the Ganados”

RESIDENT EVIL 4 REMAKE retells one of gaming’s greatest experiences

Capcom has been knocking it out of the park in recent years. The *Resident Evil* series in particular has gone on from strength to strength, beginning its resurgence with *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard* in 2017. The latest – the remake of *Resident Evil 4* – has been fuelling my evenings as well as making sure that the villager’s eerie chants torment my nights.

Truth be told, I’ve been a bit stuck on what to play lately. The sun is shining. Lockdown is a thing of the past. It’s time to seize the day... I’m sorry, the president’s daughter has been kidnapped? Taken to a remote village in Spain? And I’m the only one with the necessary skills to rescue her – why didn’t you say so?

RE4 is exactly what has been missing for me, threading that dangerous line between familiarity and over-saturation for something that blends perfectly together. Even though I’ve only played the original 2005 game once, I feel I know the game extremely well due to the massive culture surrounding it: the Mega64 *RE4* video where a live-action merchant repeatedly asks strangers, “Whaddya buyin’?” was a regular viewing in my household.

MATT POSKITT

THIS MONTH
Tried to save the president’s daughter from a crazed cult.

ALSO PLAYED
Jet Set Radio, Marvel’s Midnight Suns

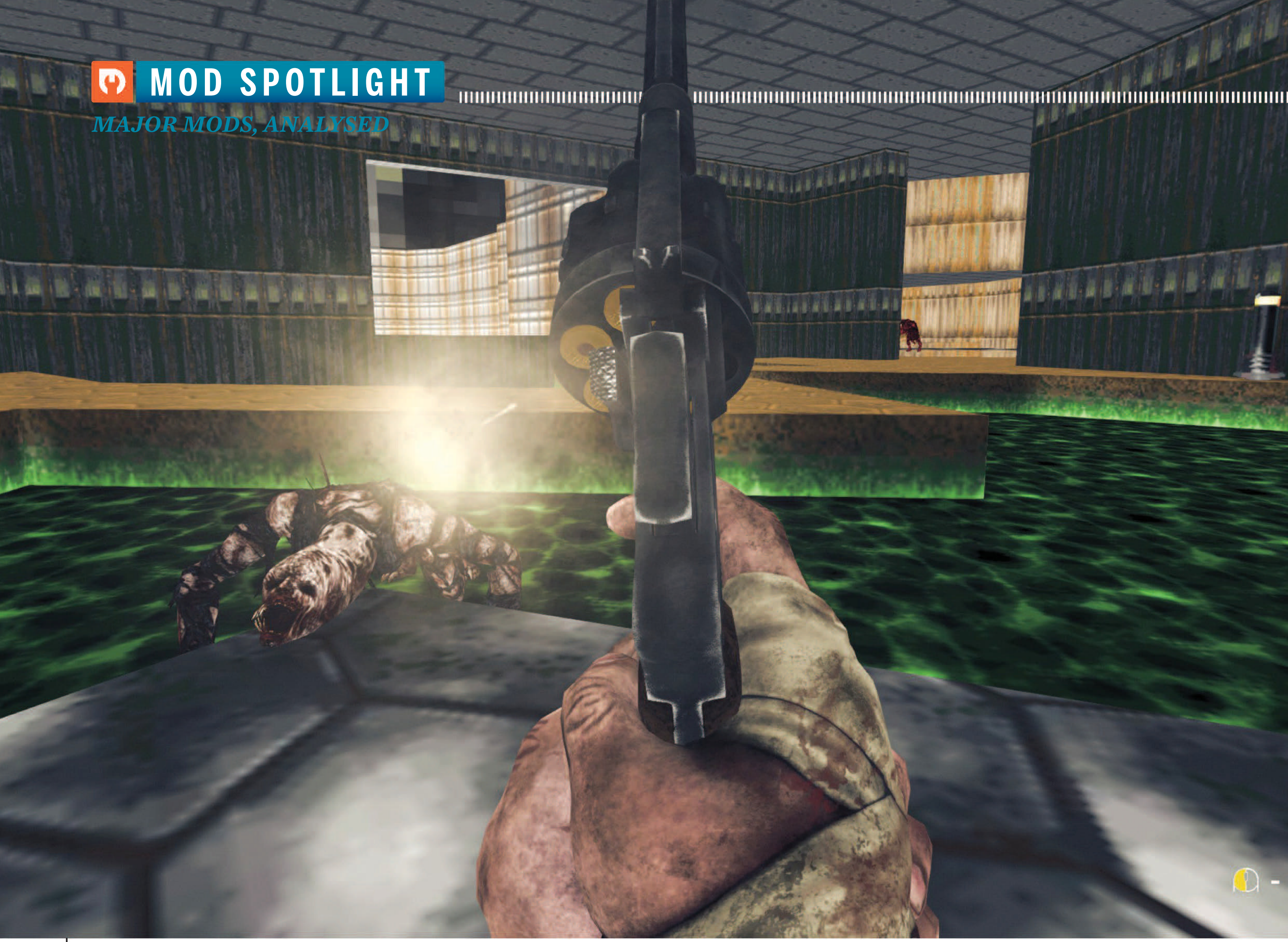
ELDEN RING EFFECT

Another aspect is difficulty. Maybe it’s the *Elden Ring* effect coming into play or my 20-plus years of experience playing videogames but my appetite for a greater challenge has only risen as of late. This has worked wonders with hard mode in RE4, as I explore the rural village, scavenge for ammo and push past the next gathering of Ganados by the skin of my teeth. Sure, it might take longer than a normal playthrough. And there is the logic that normal mode is devised to be the most balanced, and that the majority of players will experience it this way.

The pushback, however, has given me a great sense of pacing, instead of storming towards the finish line leaving a path of destruction behind.

THE MAGIC BEHIND CAPCOM’S RE ENGINE IS UP THERE WITH THE VERY BEST

Instead, it’s become super satisfying to just slowly walk around while taking in the spooky surroundings. It’s easily done, as I can’t get over how gorgeous this game looks. The magic behind Capcom’s RE Engine is up there with the very best in the industry, amplifying everything from thundering rain to eerie building structures to Leon’s silky hair. Binoculars are provided at various points to find out what dangers lie in front, yet countless times I just sit back and take in the view. ■



DOOM (E1M1)

Turn Amnesia: The Bunker into Doom.

By Christopher Livingston

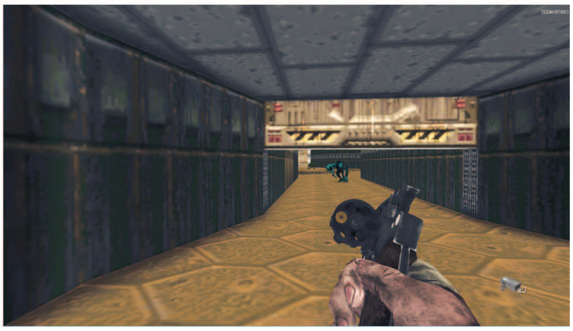
A*mnesia: The Bunker* is the latest entry – and genuinely the greatest entry – in a long series of excellent first-person survival horror adventures from Frictional Games. But even though I've played several of them, I have to admit... the *Amnesia* games aren't really my jam.

The hook of the horror series is that it keeps you alone, vulnerable, and defenceless from start to finish, and that just doesn't sit well with me since I already spend most of my actual, real life alone, vulnerable and defenceless. I don't need more of that from a game! If I'm gonna dive into a world filled with monsters and madness I demand to hold something in my hand with a bit more power than a flickering lantern.

That's why *Amnesia: The Bunker* was a bit of a surprise because it actually features a gun. A gun! In an *Amnesia* game! Thing is, this World War I revolver isn't part of some glorious power fantasy and you don't spend your time in *The Bunker* cheerfully blasting away at anything that goes bump in the night. The revolver functions more as a tool than a gun, used to shoot open locks and blow up barrels. Hell, most of the time the revolver is empty anyway because there are so gosh darn few bullets in the game. And yeah, you can shoot the monster (called the Beast or Stalker) that pursues you for the entire game, but that's actually not a great idea. Not only will bullets not kill the beast, it'll actively make it

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE June 6, 2023	**DEVELOPER** Frictional Games
PUBLISHER In-house	**LINK** amnesiathebunker.com



LEFT: The last thing you see is... not pretty.

BOTTOM: Down to my final bullet. Not a great feeling.

madder at you. Best to just run and save your bullets for when they'll actually help.

In other words, *Amnesia: The Bunker* isn't exactly *Doom*. Except... it can be. The game allows players to create custom stories and other mods, and the very first custom story that appeared turned it into *Doom*. The *Doom (E1M1)* custom story can be found in the Steam Workshop, and it makes the grim dread of *Amnesia* into a fast-paced heavy metal experience.

RIP AND RUN

In fact, the metal starts immediately – even on the menu screen the familiar music from *Doom*'s first level starts blasting. And while the map looks exactly like *Doom* instead of *Amnesia*, you won't find any imps, pinkys, or cacodemons waiting for you. Instead, you'll be chased by that same Stalker that hounds you through the bunker. On the plus side, there's much more ammo available here than in the vanilla game (it's *Doom*, after all) and you can even find another gun around the place.

There's still plenty to be worried about, however. First of all, picking up a box of ammo doesn't mean you'll get ten or even 20 bullets. There's only one bullet in each box. The loading and reloading functions the same way, too, and if you've played *The Bunker* you know how that works. You have to hold the R key to open the revolver's cylinder and then chamber one bullet at a time by holding the left mouse button. That's a slow process, especially when the Stalker appears.

And I have some more bad news: there's not just one Stalker hounding you through *Doom*'s first level. There are five of them. That's right, the hideous, unrelenting Beast from *The Bunker* now has a bunch of buddies, and it's not long before they start sniffing you out. No sooner had I slowly chambered three bullets than I saw three Stalkers appear at the end of the corridor. Run!

MARS ATTACKS

And unlike *Doom* monsters, shooting the Stalkers doesn't kill them. There are three difficulty levels in the mod. On the easiest setting it only takes a single bullet to stun a Stalker. On medium, the Stalkers move much faster and there's less ammo to pick up. On Nightmare difficulty it takes multiple shots to hold them off. You're not going to survive for long, in other words, and even if you've stunned a Stalker it won't be still for more than a few seconds.

I played on the easiest setting and still barely made it. If a Stalker even gets close they grab you and shred you, and unlike *Doom* you're not going to weasel out of it with a few hit points and find a big, chunky medkit or an invulnerability power-up floating in the corner. You're just gonna die.

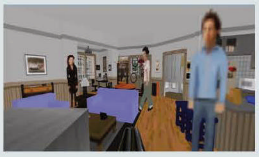
PICKING UP A BOX OF AMMO DOESN'T MEAN YOU GET TEN BULLETS

And like *Doom*, there are secrets in the mod. Notice a portion of the wall in a corridor is a slightly different shade or colour? Give it a click. I found a secret door (one of three in the level, apparently) that took me down some stairs and into a hidden chamber where, lo and behold, there was a shotgun floating above a pool of acid. Finally, a proper weapon! I ran into the acid (I could hear myself screaming in pain as I splashed through) and then awkwardly tried to load it while being chased by three Stalkers. I shot two of them. The third one got me.

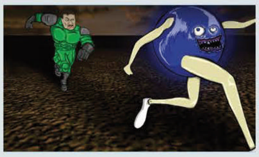
Hats off to the modder called Can't Afford A Name because combining *Amnesia* and *Doom* is a real hoot. And after playing I gotta say... maybe *Doom*, the real *Doom*, could learn a little something from this mod? Running from monsters while slowly, oh so slowly chambering a single bullet at a time is pretty tense and exhilarating. Maybe the next *Doom* game should ship with an *Amnesia* reloading mode. Just think how long it would take to realistically reload a rocket launcher. Now imagine doing it with a Revenant bearing down on you. ■

ETERNAL FLAME

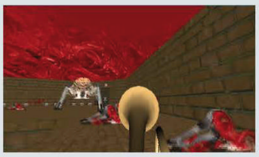
More weird Doom *mods*



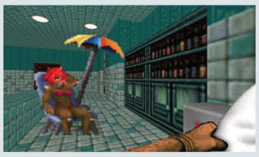
SEINFELD.WAD
It's *Doom* but in Jerry's apartment. Enjoy the sights and sounds of the show.



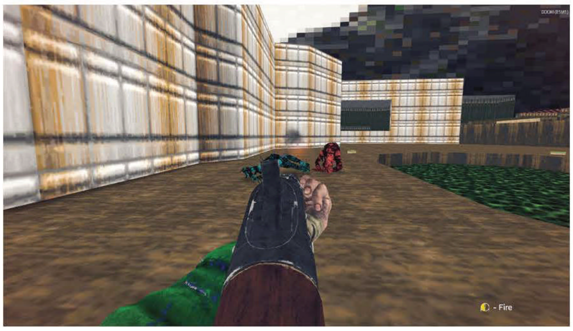
RUN FOR IT
It's *Doom* but everything from ammo to keycards to medkits run away from you on little legs.

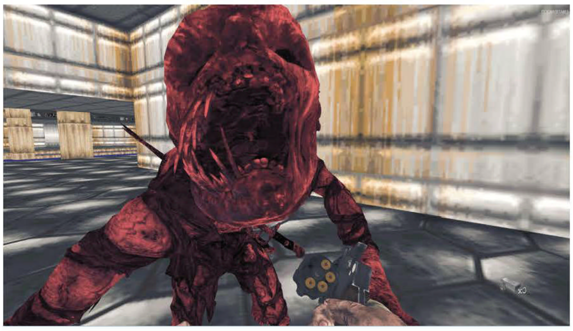


DOOT TC
It's *Doom* but instead of a bunch of guns you have a trumpet. Don't worry. It's really powerful.



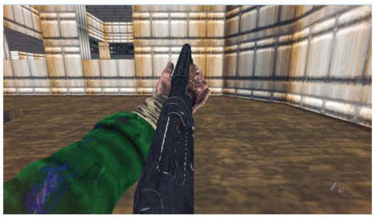
HDOOM
It's *Doom* but um. You can have sex with the monsters. You know what they say. When in Hell...





ABOVE: Do you mind? I'm reloading.

RIGHT: A shotgun is comforting. But still won't save you.



GET STARTED IN

BALDUR'S GATE III

Welcome to the Forgotten Realms. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

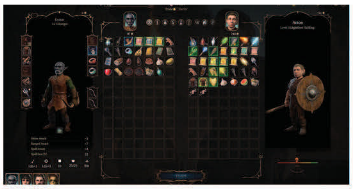
DIFFICULTY
Normal

TIME
10 hours

VITAL LINKS
Every romance: shorturl.at/kotx2
Class guide: shorturl.at/djqt2
All races: shorturl.at/jvzN2

IGNORE THE META

1 As you'd expect from a game based on Dungeons & Dragons, *Baldur's Gate III* puts a lot of emphasis on roleplaying a character. While it might make the game a little harder, try not to min-max everything, and instead just lean into doing what you want.



LOOT HERE

2 It might not be quite as immersive to take everything not nailed down and sell it to vendors, but it's a good way to get gold to help you buy items. Your characters all have a good carry capacity, and with four of them, that's a whole lot of loot you can lug around.

SAVE YOURSELF

3 Traps and monsters wait around every corner in the Forgotten Realms, and you're often only a few minutes away from your entire party getting wiped by some unfortunate series of events. Save lots and often to make sure you don't have to replay sections.

GET CREATIVE

4 As with Dungeons & Dragons, *Baldur's Gate III* rewards creativity and experimentation. Wondering if you can use a spell a certain way? Give it a try! Worst things worst you reload a save, but putting hare-brained schemes into practice is part of the joy of TTRPGs.

USE THE WORLD

5 Whether it's blowing up an oil barrel to incinerate a gang of foes or shoving an enemy from the top of a cliff, taking smart advantage of the world, its terrain, and its contents will often let you triumph against overwhelming odds.

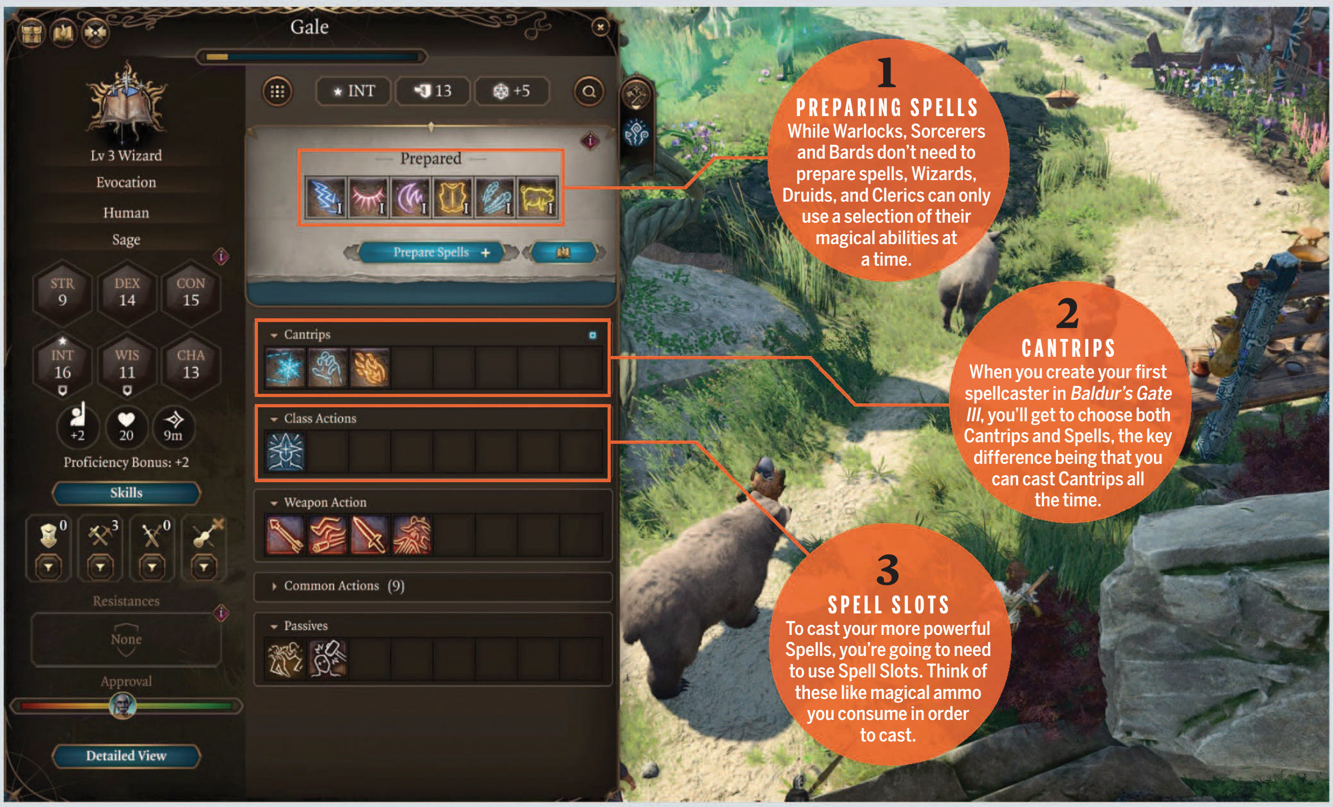
LIGHT TOUCH

6 The Forgotten Realms are filled with ruins and pitch-black caverns, so having a source of light is always vital. Some races have Darkvision, but making sure you at least have a torch ready will make combat and perceiving threats easier.

TREAD CAREFULLY

7 Passive perception checks are a big part of exploration and seeing if you'll be caught out by traps, or spot secrets to take advantage of. If you see a perception check being rolled, take things slow, and keep an eye out for whatever glowing object a success might reveal.

IT'S MAGIC Y'KNOW? *Master mysterious spells and sorceries*


Gale
INT
13
+5
Lv 3 Wizard
Evocation
Human
Sage
Prepared
Prepare Spells
STR 9
DEX 14
CON 15
INT 16
WIS 11
CHA 13
+2
20
9m
Proficiency Bonus: +2
Skills
Resistances
None
Approval
Detailed View
Cantrips
Class Actions
Weapon Action
Common Actions (9)
Passives

1
PREPARING SPELLS
While Warlocks, Sorcerers and Bards don't need to prepare spells, Wizards, Druids, and Clerics can only use a selection of their magical abilities at a time.

2
CANTRIPS
When you create your first spellcaster in *Baldur's Gate III*, you'll get to choose both Cantrips and Spells, the key difference being that you can cast Cantrips all the time.

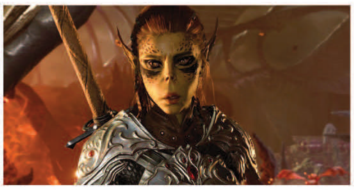
3
SPELL SLOTS
To cast your more powerful Spells, you're going to need to use Spell Slots. Think of these like magical ammo you consume in order to cast.

ASK AROUND

8 Even more so than other RPGs, talking to characters is a massive part of *Baldur's Gate III*, so be sure to approach NPCs often to gather info. You can even talk to dead people or animals with certain abilities, and Wood Gnomes can talk to animals all the time.

COME BACK LATER

9 There's no shame in running away from a horde of enemies. The same is true if you're bashing your head against a combat encounter and keep dying. Remember that you can always return later after you've levelled a bit and gained new abilities.



PET PEEVES

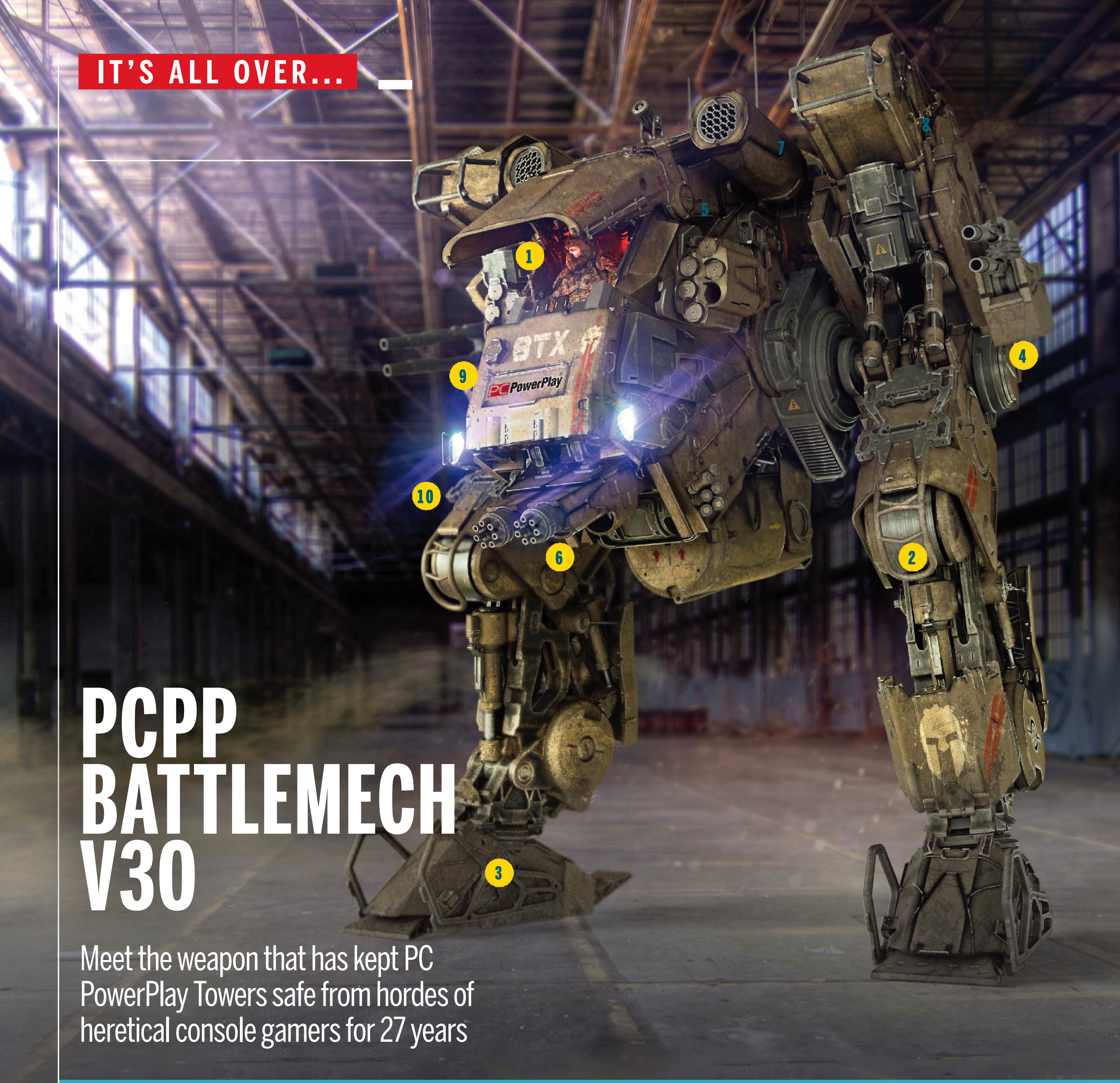
10 Depending on what type of character you like to play, party composition can be very important, especially if you don't want them to hate you. Your companions will approve or disapprove of certain actions based on their character, so pick wisely.

SPELL IT OUT

11 If you want some extra abilities, remember that Wizards like Gale can learn new spells from scrolls you find or purchase. Just go to the Spellbook to open the list of all those available, though it will cost some extra gold to acquire each new one.

ONE OF A KIND

12 The first time you play *Baldur's Gate III* it's a good idea to create your own character. This lets you get to know the established companions and their personalities in a way that picking one of them wouldn't. Also avoid doubling up classes.



PCPP BATTLEMECH V30

Meet the weapon that has kept PC PowerPlay Towers safe from hordes of heretical console gamers for 27 years

1 COCKPIT Lined with posters of Gordon Freeman, water-cooled tower PCs, and PCPP magazine spreads to keep moral high.

2 GYROS AND ACTUATORS Created by none other than Gabe Newell himself in his Steam Workshop, these allow precise, rapid movement.

3 ARMOUR PLATING When a big console gaming exclusive foe appears, these tough reinforced armour plates mitigate its attacks.

4 JUMP JETS PC gaming moves faster than console gaming, and these jump jets allow the PCPP BattleMech V30 to outmanoeuvre foes.

5 TARGET TRACKING SYSTEM Great for keeping track of incoming releases, as well as hardware orders from Overclockers and Amazon.

6 BALLISTIC CANNONS If console gamers are foolish enough to try to break into PCPP Towers on foot, then these bad boys welcome them.

7 MISSILES Great for wiping out pockets of weak, underpowered gaming consoles, with wide area-of-effect explosive damage dealt.

8 GAUSS RIFLES When nothing but a BFG is needed, this id-created electromagnetic projectile launcher delivers massive damage.

9 PCPP BATTLE LOGO Well, it looks cool doesn't it? Also, it has been proven to improve the BattleMech's awesomeness by 97%.

10 RGB LIGHTING A BattleMech representing PC gaming wouldn't be complete without RGB lighting, which changes based on the pilot's mood.

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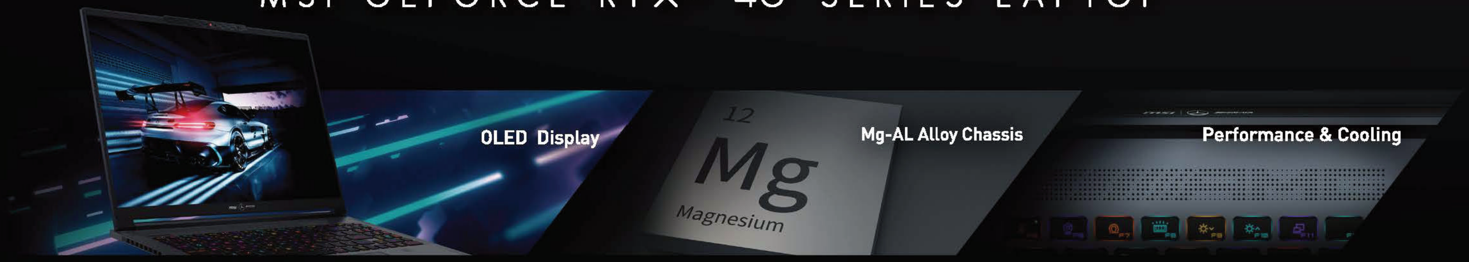
OLED Display
12
Mg
Magnesium
Mg-AL Alloy Chassis
Performance & Cooling

13th Gen Intel® Core™ i9-13900H processor | Windows 11 Pro | NVIDIA® GeForce RTX™ 4070 Laptop GPU | DDR5 16GB*2 | 2TB*1 NVMe SSD PCIe Gen4 | 16" UHD+(3840x2400), OLED, VESA DisplayHDR™ 600 Certified

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